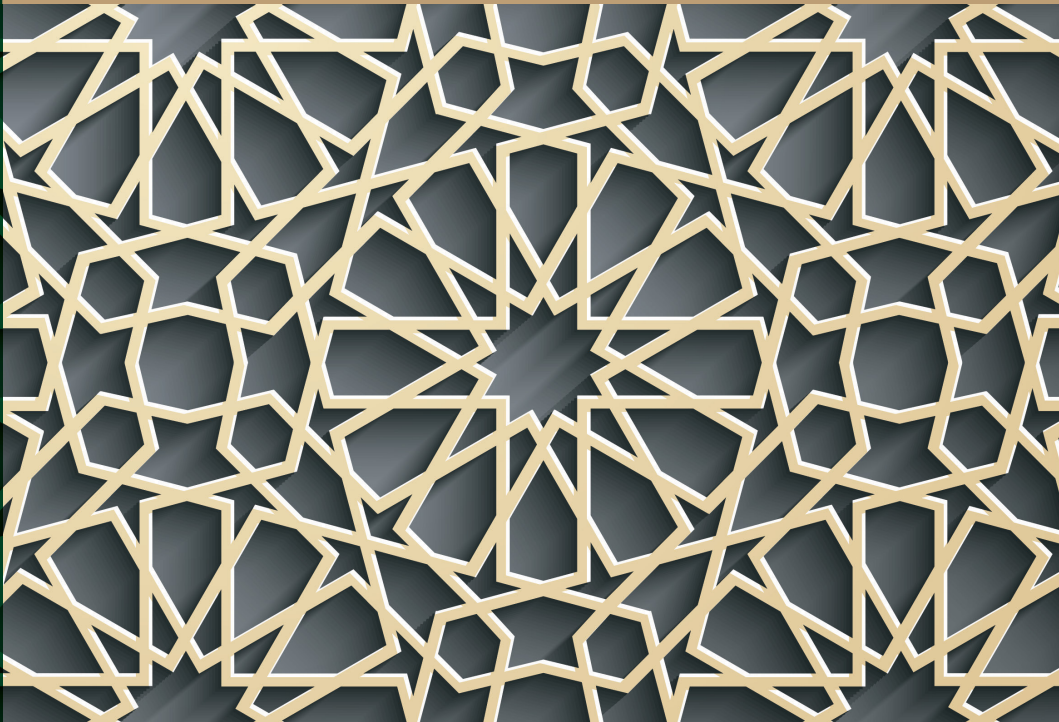


STUDIES IN ISLAMIC ETHICS

Behind the Story: Ethical Readings of Qur'ānic Narratives

مِاورداء الحكاية
در آيات اخلاقيتي في القصص القرآنية

Edited by Samer Rashwani



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Behind the Story: Ethical Readings of Qur'ānic Narratives

ما وراء الحكاية: دراسات أخلاقية في القصة القرآنية

Studies in Islamic Ethics

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Behind the Story: Ethical Readings of Qur'anic Narratives

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دِرَاسَاتُ اخْلَاقِيَّةٍ فِي الْقِصَصِ الْقُرْآنِيَّةِ

Edited by

Samer Rashwani

مُحَرَّرٌ
سَامِرُ رَشْوَانِي



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Contents

Acknowledgments	VII
List of Figures	VIII
Notes on Style, Transliteration, and Dates	IX
Notes on Contributors	X

Introduction	1
<i>Samer Rashwani</i>	

PART 1

Re-thinking the Qur'ānic Narratives

- 1 The Story of Two Brothers
Archetypes of Peace and Rivalry 9
Samer Rashwani
- 2 "Signs for Those Who Can Decipher Them"
Ancient Ruins in the Qur'ān 44
Devin J. Stewart
- 3 Divine and Human Hospitality in the Narratives of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*
Towards Qur'ānic Narrative Ethics 93
Hannelies Koloska
- 4 Sacrifice, Liberalism and the Qur'ān's Revisionist Reading of the *Akeda*
An Islamic Contribution to the Political Theology of Democracy 120
Mohammad Fadel
- 5 The "Para-narrative" Aims of Qur'ānic Narrating
An Examination of the Story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'ān and Bible 152
Taira Amin

PART 2

The Reception History of the Qur'ānic Narrative and Morality

- 6 The Qur'ānic Narrative and Its Reception History 185
 Samer Rashwani

- 7 Sharpening Intuitive Knowledge
 Sufi Storytelling for Instilling Virtues 210
 Fatih Ermiş

- 8 Disability Rhetoric and Ethics in the Qur'ān's Narratives
 A Literary Analysis of Speech and Hearing in Q 21:51–72 and
 Q 20:9–43 234
 Halla Attallah

- 9 The Narrativisation of Qur'ānic Verses and the Formation of Ethics
 Prefatory Traditions in Ottoman Calligraphy 257
 Bilal Badat

- 10 Qur'ānic Narratives in d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697)
 An Ethical Reception of Islamic Scripture in Early Modern Europe 279
 Emmanuelle Stefanidis

- Index of Names and Places 313
- Index of Terms 321

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Figures

- 3.1 Qaşr al-Sitt ʿUnshuq on the left side, al-Sitt ʿUnshuqs tomb (*turba*) on the right side, picture: *private* 94
- 3.2 West gate with Qurʾānic inscription, picture: *private* 95
- 3.3 West gate, door, and benches, picture: *private* 113
- 3.4 Turbat al-Sitt ʿUnshuq, open windows facing the street, benches beside the door, picture: *private* 114

Notes on Style, Transliteration, and Dates

For referencing, this volume follows the *Chicago Manual of Style* author-date in-text citation system.

Arabic words and names are transliterated according to the system used in Brill's *Encyclopaedia of Islam Three*, which is also adopted in the *Journal of Islamic Ethics* (*JIE*):

Consonants: ʾ, b, t, th, j, ḥ, kh, d, dh, r, z, s, sh, ṣ, ḍ, ṭ, z, ʿ, gh, f, q, k, l, m, n, h, w, y.

Short vowels: a, i, u.

Long vowels: ā, ī, ū.

Diphthongs: aw, ay.

Tāʾ marbūʿa: -a, -at (construct state).

While classical proper names are fully transliterated (e.g., al-Ghazālī), modern names, i.e., since 1900, also the official or common spellings are adopted (e.g., Muhammad Abdullah Draz). The “l” of the definite article “al-” is always retained, regardless of whether it is assimilated in pronunciation to the initial consonant of the word to which it is attached (*idghām*).

If not otherwise specified, the dates given are common era (CE) dates. If two dates are provided (e.g., 505/1111), the first one is the year according to the Islamic *hijrī* calendar (AH), and the second the CE date. For dates after 1900, only the CE date is provided.

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Introduction

Samer Rashwani

Qur'ānic stories, encompassing chronicles of both prophetic and non-prophetic personas, have consistently gained wide popularity amongst readership. Despite their vast appeal, the study of Qur'ānic stories has often been marginalized in classical scholarship. Historically, exegetes and literary connoisseurs have not accorded them proper attention, nor have they been systematically integrated into the established typologies of Qur'ānic studies. However, by the early twentieth century, Muslim scholarship witnessed a resurgence of interest in Qur'ānic narratives, leading to its development into a distinctive genre. This revival marked a transition from historical approaches to literary, religious, and parenetical explorations. Western scholars began their philological studies of Qur'ānic narratives in the early nineteenth century, aiming to identify potential influences from Jewish, Christian, or extra-biblical sources on the Qur'ān. In recent decades, the academic focus has shifted towards viewing the Qur'ānic narrative as a distinct literary genre. This transition aligns with advancements in literary theory and narrative ethics, underscoring the ethical nuances of narration across diverse fields like theology, moral philosophy, psychotherapy, environmental ethics, education, and pastoral care.

While numerous studies have been conducted on individual Qur'ānic stories, comprehensive studies on the Qur'ānic narrative as a genre—examining its literary features, religious significance, theological implications, and hermeneutics—remain scarce. Moreover, only a handful of studies address the reception history of the Qur'ānic narrative in both classical and contemporary scholarship. This project aims to bridge this gap, championing the study of the Qur'ānic narrative as a literary genre and highlighting its pivotal role in shaping traditional Islamic law, theology, Sufism, politics, and ethical values. It also elucidates the potential of Qur'ānic narrative as a guide for moral orientation in various fields, including art, architecture, and applied ethics.

This volume is an outcome of a workshop convened at the Center of Islamic Legislation and Ethics in January 2020. The assembled chapters provide diverse perspectives on Qur'ānic narratives. They are broadly sorted into two sections: novel readings of specific Qur'ānic narratives and their broader moral implications, and exploration of the reception history of Qur'ānic narratives within Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, spanning diverse fields, such as mysticism, art, and disability studies.

In the opening chapter, “The Story of Two Brothers: Archetypes of Peace and Rivalry,” Samer Rashwani explores the numerous ethical and interpretive conundrums that have sprung from the Qur’ānic parable of the two sons of Adam, such as the legitimacy of self-defense, the assignment of responsibility for sins, and the inherent essence of human malevolence. This chapter explores the various ethical representations of Abel and Cain as epitomes of “good” and “evil.” Abel is depicted as an epitome of righteousness, clemency, forbearance, chivalry, pacificism, and rationality. At the same time, Cain is set out as a personification of lawlessness, envy, wrath, vengeance, and caprice. The author aims to unravel the intricate theological and moral queries underpinning these interpretations.

Devin J. Stewart, in his chapter, “Signs for Those Who Can Decipher Them’: Ancient Ruins in the Qur’ān,” revisits the Qur’ān’s discourse on the annihilation narratives and the ancient ruins, pursuing the various ethical justifications for their dreadful doom as well as the moral duty to study ancient civilizations and ancient ruins. Stewart questions the embedded ethical paradigm of the Qur’ān’s annihilation stories. He asks whether it reflects a consequentialist morality; dictating that one must listen to prophets only to avoid ending up like the punished nations of the past; or a utilitarian morality—dictating that following correct behavior will allow contemporary civilizations to flourish. He argues that both interpretations are implied. Stewart shows that although the Qur’ān, in many cases, seems to put forward a singular, unwavering message; the Qur’ān does not preclude the existence of exceptions that merit special attention. Thus exists the necessity of continued observation, investigation, and deduction.

Hannelies Koloska’s chapter, “Divine and Human Hospitality in the Narratives of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*: Towards Qur’ānic Narrative Ethics,” explores how ethical perspectives of Qur’ānic narratives and their intertwinement with Qur’ānic moral directives and theological proclamations may enhance our perception of the ethical dimension of the Qur’ān at the time of its proclamation and in its later Islamic appropriation. The author depicts the description of divine hospitality in paradise and the narratives relating to Abraham and Lot’s hospitality in Q 15 within their historical and intertextual embedding. Besides the theoretical analysis, Koloska discusses the artistic embodiment of this moral virtue by referring to the residence of Sitt Tunshuq in Jerusalem as an exhibition of engraved piety where the architecture reflects the ethics of Qur’ānic and Islamic hospitality. “The Islamic virtue of hospitality, hence, extends beyond death and across the walls, inviting those who pass by to sit and linger, to receive blessings by reading and listening to the Qur’ān, reflecting the promised divine hospitality, Q 15:46: ‘Enter them, in peace and security.’”

Mohammad Fadel, in “Sacrifice, Liberalism and the Qur’ān’s Revisionist Reading of the *Akeda*: An Islamic Contribution to the Political Theology of Democracy,” engages critically with the thesis of Paul W. Kahn in his *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (2011), and opens an avenue for discussion on the ethical implications of Qur’ānic narratives in the realm of politics and political theory. Fadel concedes with Kahn that stories and conceptions of the sacred provide essential resources for political theology. While Kahn uses the *Akeda* as the archetype of the political—whether in the form derived from the Hebrew Bible or of the New Testament—Fadel offers a fresh interpretation of the Qur’ān’s recasting of the story and its concept of sacred sacrifice as a potential solution to the dilemmas present in Kahn’s interpretation of the *Akedah*. In Fadel’s reading, the Qur’ān offers a paradigm of sacrifice that is both universal and particular and that is grounded in thanksgiving and solidarity, rather than propitiation rooted in blood sacrifice. The Qur’ānic account of sacrifice inscribes a ritual practice essential for upholding the moral principles necessary for a harmonious society.

Taira Amin’s chapter, “The ‘Para-Narrative’ Aims of Qur’ānic Narrating: An Examination of the Story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in the Qur’ān and Bible” introduces a set of analytical concepts informed by sociological and linguistic theories to examine the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba comparatively in the Qur’ān and the Bible. Her findings indicate that the most fundamental para-narrative aim may be the vindication of prophets misunderstood or rejected by their own people. In retelling their stories, the primary objective is correcting myths and fallacies regarding their personhood; moving beyond merely conveying lessons of exhortation. Through the examination of the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, Amin concludes that the para-narrative agenda is less about emphasizing Solomon as a Prophet-cum-King with extraordinary powers and means of empowerment—which all originated from the Divine—and more as a moral exemplar of humility, gratitude, and repentance.

The second section, which explores the reception history of Qur’ānic narratives within Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, begins with a chapter investigating “The Qur’ānic Narrative and Its Reception History.” Rashwani probes the relative marginalization of these narratives in pre-modern scholarship, drawing on the historical, theological, and epistemological underpinnings that contributed to their diminished prominence. Furthermore, the chapter addresses the modern resurgence of interest in these narratives, underscoring a dynamic shift in approaches, sources, and methodologies. This shift is profoundly shaped by the recognition of Qur’ānic narratives for their theological, moral, and literary profundity. However, the chapter underscores that

a substantial lacuna encompasses their reception and the hermeneutics of Qur'ānic narrative as a distinct literary genre.

Fatih Ermiş, in "Sharpening Intuitive Knowledge: Sufi Storytelling for Instilling Virtues," delves into the Sufi literature of Kınālīzāde 'Alī Çelebī (d. 979/1572) and Rūmī (d. 672/1273). Ermiş explores the significance of storytelling and the retelling of Qur'ānic stories to elucidate moral virtues and address certain theoretical complexities inherent to *akhlāq* literature. He highlights Kınālīzāde's emphasis on engaging with stories, either through listening or reading, as a means to refine one's intuitive grasp of the "middle path" of ethical decision-making. This equilibrium is intrinsically challenging to achieve due to its intricate nuances. However, engaging with narratives enables individuals to cultivate a more profound intuition, aligning them more closely with the ethical path. As this wisdom (*ḥikma*) is internalized and practiced, one's comprehension becomes increasingly refined, demonstrating the symbiotic relationship between knowledge acquisition and its ethical application.

Halla Attallah's chapter, "Disability Rhetoric and Ethics in the Qur'ān's Narratives: A Literary Analysis of Speech and Hearing in Q 21:51–72 and Q 20:9–43," offers a literary analysis of hearing/deafness and speaking/muteness in the Qur'ān's narrative content through the lens of disability studies. She examines the narrative function of speech and hearing vis-à-vis the idea of religious knowledge in the stories of Abraham and his community in Q 21:51–70 and Moses at the burning bush in Q 20:9–43, arguing that although the Qur'ānic narratives posit a correlation between the ability to speak/hear and the capacity to engage religious knowledge; the Qur'ānic story of Moses deemphasizes this assessment by presenting a scenario whereby speech fluency—and conversely, the ability to hear speech—is not a requirement for religious participation and inclusion. This notion is further supported by other tales of the Qur'ān, such as the story of Zachariah, who is commanded by God not to speak for three nights and instead communicates through gestures (Q 19:10–11). Attallah concludes that just as God accommodates Moses' disability, Muslim communities, and mosques have an ethical obligation to embrace and accommodate people of various (dis)abilities and remove barriers to inclusion and participation.

Bilal Badat's chapter, "The Narrativisation of Qur'ānic Verses and the Formation of Ethics: Prefatory Traditions in Ottoman Calligraphy," pursues the theological and ethical reasonings formulated in Ottoman prefaces and introductory notes to texts on Ottoman calligraphy through guided study of the use of narratives in the formation of professional ethics. He argues that Ottoman authors established the ethical principles of calligraphy through the hermeneutical reading of specific Qur'ānic verses. Such verses were taken as proof

of the sanctity of the scribal arts and further transposed into poetic and literary narratives to provide a sense of meaning and moral orientation for the study of calligraphy. Ottoman calligrapher-authors engaged hermeneutically in the narrativization and scriptural exegesis of specific Qur'ānic verses, validating the study of calligraphy as a virtue-based ethical pursuit that conforms to the broader epistemological fabric of religious knowledge, and contributing towards the formation of ethical and moral values.

Bringing to light an understudied aspect of the non-Muslim reception of the Qur'ān, Emmanuelle Stefanidis, in "Qur'ānic Narratives in d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697): An Ethical Reception of Islamic Scripture in Early Modern Europe," analyses the Qur'ānic narratives in a monument of Europe's encyclopedic movement: the *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697) of d'Herbelot (d. 1695). She shows how d'Herbelot was keen to underline the ethical dimension of the narratives, often citing related Muslim mystical or philosophical interpretations. Thus, the irrepressible love of Zulaykhā for Yūsuf is said to represent the love of the creature for his Creator; the primordial covenant between God and Ādam's progeny (Q 7:172) leads to a reflection on the nature of time; and the four birds dismembered by Ibrāhīm to witness God's power of resurrection (Q 2:260) are said to symbolize the passions that need to be tamed—lust, greed, vanity and the excessive need for human company. Stefanidis highlights through The *Bibliothèque Orientale* and its influence the role that the Qur'ān played in European intellectual and literary life at the dawn of the Enlightenment.

This volume underscores the "Qur'ānic narrative" as a literary genre that merits special attention and further exploration in four directions: First, delving into its reception history and its profound impact on both classical and contemporary Muslim scholarship; second, a comparative study of the reception of the "Qur'ānic narrative" with the reception of its biblical counterparts. Third, the volume heralds a call for in-depth discussions about the hermeneutics of the "Qur'ānic narrative" that encompasses its dimensions and implications when approached from a literary standpoint, particularly when contrasted with other analytical lenses, including philological, historical, and psychological interpretations. Fourth, although the concern with the ethical implications of religious stories is as ancient as the stories themselves, this volume aspires to advance the systematic study of Qur'ānic narratives. It highlights their multifaceted potential, which extends beyond the realm of Qur'ānic studies into broader spheres such as education, politics, moral philosophy, bioethics, and environmental concerns.

PART 1

Re-thinking the Qur'ānic Narratives



The Story of Two Brothers

Archetypes of Peace and Rivalry

Samer Rashwani

1 Introduction

In 1966, Jawdat Saʿīd (d. 2022), a Syrian Islamic thinker and preacher, crafted a timely credo in his book titled *Madhhab Ibn Ādam al-Awwal: Mushkilat al-Unf fī al-Amal al-Islāmī* (“The Doctrine of the First Son of Adam: The Problem of Violence in Islamic Movements”). Thirty years later, he published another book titled *Kun ka-Bni Ādam* (“Be Like the Son of Adam”), a direct reference to a Prophetic *ḥadīth* bearing the same wording. The gist of his argument was a call for Muslims to embody the spirit of the martyred son of Adam, a figure who chose not to answer violence with violence but rather held back his hand and refrained from engaging in violent exchange. This is not simply an action but a methodology and a profound doctrine that, according to Saʿīd, should be adopted by Islamic movements and societies in their quest for justice, peace, and the true principles of Islam. Saʿīd became a beacon of inspiration, and his teachings were brought to life during the initial nonviolent phase of the Syrian revolution, as the youth marched to the streets holding roses against the armed forces (for more on Saʿīd’s thought, see Rak 2016; Menghini 2019; Lohlker 2022).

In 1998, a disciple of Saʿīd, Saḥar Abū Ḥarb, penned a thought-provoking response in her book *Lā Takun ka-Bnay Ādam: Lā Qātilan wa-Lā Maqtūlan* (“Do Not Be Like the Sons of Adam: Neither Murderer nor Slain”). Throughout the book, Abū Ḥarb presents the story of Adam’s sons as a timeless allegory for the eternal struggle between success and failure. Her book offers a kind of socio-psychological analysis of Abel’s (Hābīl) discourse directed at his brother Cain (Qābīl)¹ in the wake of a life-threatening confrontation. She concludes that Abel’s rhetoric bore an undertone of arrogance and provocation, a catalyst that triggered the dreadful act of murder. Instead of expressing sympathy and empathy to his unsuccessful brother—whose sacrifice was spurned—Abel tacitly humiliated and belittled him. He proudly alluded to his piety and fear of God while foreboding a gloomy fate for his brother; to bear the weight of his

1 For clarity in our discussion, I will use the names Abel and Cain, the two sons of Adam, though they are not named in the Qurʾān and many Muslim scholars refrain from using these names.

sin and descend into the abyss of Hell. While free from physical violence, she asserts that Abel's approach was filled with harsh verbal assault, which, rather than the refusal of the sacrifice, possibly became the primary cause of his murder (Abū Ḥarb 2006).

These contributions, and the subsequent debates they stirred, reflect how captivating and influential such a primordial story can be. These moralistic interpretations of the Qur'ānic story, offering a framework for an Islamic theory of nonviolence in both word and deed, may seem like a novel phenomenon. However, the story of the two sons of Adam spawned various ethical dilemmas that have long been the subject of heated debates and thoughtful contemplation within the folds of Islamic heritage.

2 The Literature on the Story of the Two Sons of Adam

There is a noticeable void in the dedicated study of Qur'ānic narratives, particularly concerning the methods and approaches of their interpretation and the history of their scholarly examination, which was primarily atomistic (see chapter 6). The dedicated engagement with the Qur'ānic narratives is represented by the marginal literature on prophetic stories (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*). On account of its roots in exegetical biblical and post-biblical traditions, this extra-Qur'ānic literature embellished the stories with rich exegetical and moralistic details, besides the embroidery of details typical of storytelling.

There is not a single book or treatise solely dedicated to the story of the two sons of Adam in the pre-modern era. In the last century, however, it was revived as a tool for moral instruction, especially in literature (cf. Günther 1999). Modern scholarly inquiry into this tale remains quite limited. The most comprehensive survey is that of Bork-Qaysieh (1994), who paints a vivid tapestry of the story's multi-faceted presence within Islamic tradition; spanning *ḥadīth*, exegesis, prophetic stories, history, and folklore. However, the author's exploration remains limited, particularly concerning the analysis of the legal and theological foundations of the surveyed literature.

Early Orientalists primarily focused on the biblical roots of the narrative (Geiger 1898; Speier 1931), while later studies branched out into comparative analysis, seeking patterns of divergence and concordance (Stillman 1974; Busse 2001; Witztum 2011). Witztum's work stands out as a combination of comparative analysis, primarily with the Syriac tradition, and an intensive textual examination of the Qur'ānic narrative itself. While it provides an in-depth study of the tale, it leans away from investigating its theological and legal

ramifications. In contrast, the work of Zilio-Grandi (1999) shows a keener interest in Cain's character and how it encapsulates the problem of evil in Islamic tradition. In his work, *al-'Ajīb wa-l-Gharīb fī Kutub al-Tafsīr* ("The Wondrous and the Strange in the Qur'ānic Commentaries," 2006), al-Sa'fī delves into the mythological underpinnings of the story as depicted in exegetical literature and *Isrā'īliyyāt*. He identifies three pivotal themes that resonate in human existence: the roots of violence, the inception of death, and the foundation of punishment (al-Sa'fī 2006, 175–193).

A host of biblical studies have delved into the story and its ethical implications (Böttrich 1995; Byron 2011; Unterseher 2014). Of these, Byron's work closely aligns with our focus. Byron traced the interpretive evolution of Cain and Abel's narrative through the first millennium CE. His inspection of the story's understanding among Jewish and Christian interpreters highlights that Jews and Christians shared many theological conundrums and questions evoked by Scripture. Both religious groups grappled with aspects such as God's seemingly arbitrary acceptance of Abel's sacrifice and Cain's seemingly unpunished act of murder. Byron notes that numerous interpretive traditions are shared across the three monotheistic religions (Byron 2011, 6). Reading Byron's work against the backdrop of Islamic exegesis and theological and legal traditions uncovers a variety of shared moral and ethical concerns, questions, and sensitivities worthy of independent study.

This chapter aims to investigate the reception and understanding of the story of Adam's two sons by Muslim scholars, particularly concerning its moral, legal, and theological implications. In the subsequent discussion, the focus will not be on analyzing the extra-Qur'ānic narrations but on observing how later jurists, theologians, and exegetes adapted or overlooked these narrations in their quest to resolve the problematic questions arising from the Qur'ānic narratives. I will follow the narrative as outlined in the Qur'an, highlighting the relevance and connection between the ethical dilemmas and the Qur'ānic text.

The story: In what follows, and due to the limitation of space, I will solely discuss the first four verses of the story, which end with murder. Here is the story as presented in the Qur'an:

And recite unto them, with truth, the account of Adam's two sons, when they each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them, though not accepted from the other. One said, "I will surely slay you!" [The other] said, "God accepts only from the reverent (27). Even if you stretch forth your hand against me to slay me, I shall not stretch forth my hand against you to slay you. Truly I fear God, Lord of the worlds (28).

I desire that you should be burdened with my sin and your sin and so become one of the inhabitants of the Fire. Such is the recompense of the wrongdoers" (29). Then his soul prompted him to slay his brother, and he slew him, and thus came to be among the losers (30).

Q 5:27–30²

For the sake of comparison and to show the kind of extra-Qur'ānic material the exegetes were using, I will present here the story as narrated by Muqātil (d. 150/767):

Narrate to them the tale of the sons of Adam, Abel, and Cain, as follows: Eve bore in a single pregnancy a boy and a girl, Cain, and Iqlima. Then, in another pregnancy, she bore another pair, Abel and Lyūdhā. Cain's sister was more beautiful than Abel's sister. When they came of age, Adam proposed that each should marry the other's sister. Cain argued that each should marry his own sister. Adam suggested they each offer a sacrifice; whoever had his sacrifice accepted would have the right to marry Iqlima. Adam then left for Mecca.

Cain, being a farmer, offered the worst of his crops, eaten by insects. Abel, a shepherd, offered the best of his sheep with its froth and milk. They placed their sacrifices on a hill and prayed to God. Fire descended from heaven and consumed Abel's offering, leaving Cain's untouched. Cain grew envious and declared to Abel, "I will surely kill you."

Abel replied, "My brother, do not stain your hand with innocent blood and commit such a grave act. I only sought our father's pleasure and yours. If you do this, God will shame you for killing me without reason or crime. You will live in misery and fear on earth. You will become finer than a hair's breadth because of misery and fear, and God will curse you." He continued this speech until noon. In his final words to Cain, Abel said, "If you kill me, you will be the first to be marked with misery, the first of our father's offspring to be led to the fire, and I will be the first martyr to enter Paradise."

Enraged, Cain said, "You shall not live in this world, and it will be said that your offering was accepted and mine was not." Abel replied, "Then you will be miserable forever." Infuriated, Cain killed him with a stone, crushing his head. This happened in the land of India, in the evening, while Adam was in Mecca (Muqātil 2002, 1:468–470. Similar narrations are mentioned by early Shī'ī commentaries cf. al-'Ayyāshī 1991, 1:316–320; al-Qummī 1984, 1:191–193).

² The translation is based on that of Nasr et al. 2015 with some modifications.

3 The Relevance of the Story

Many exegetes have tried to explain the relevance of the story of Adam's sons to *sūrat al-Mā'ida* by outlining its correlation with either preceding or succeeding verses. Ostensibly, the majority of these interpretations are based on an underlying moral framework.

Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) offers two explanations for its inclusion. First, it operates as a response to the Jews who intended to harm the Muslims. The narrative informs Jews of the repercussions of deceit and injustice. The indicator for this interpretation lies in Q 5:11: "O you who have believed, remember the favor of God upon you when a people determined to outstretch their hands [in aggression] against you, but He withheld their hands from you." In both scenarios, the Qur'ān employs the phrase "outstretched their hands" to remind them of the fate of the murderous son of Adam, marked by loss and regret (see also al-Jushamī 2019, 3:1932–1933; a similar interpretation is mentioned by al-Ṭūsī 1989, 3:492).³

Secondly, it functions as a parable of forgiveness. al-Ṭabarī explains:

Everything that God has mentioned in these verses is a parable for the sons of Adam, urging the believers among the Prophet's Companions to pardon and overlook the actions of the Jews of Banū al-Naḍir, who intended to assassinate the Prophet and the Muslims ... God contrasts the treachery of the Jews with the fidelity of the believers and their willingness to forgive, exemplified in the story of Adam's two sons who offered sacrifices. This story serves as a model for Muslims, encouraging them to emulate the righteous son rather than the wicked one.

AL-ṬABARĪ 2001, 8:346

Al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) links the story to Q 5:15: "O People of the Scripture, there has come to you Our Messenger, making clear to you much of what you used to conceal of the Scripture and overlooking much." He views the story as proof of Muḥammad's prophecy, as it relayed this biblical narrative without

3 While earlier exegetes understood it as addressing the Jews, Robinson understands the story as addressing Muslims, warning them that Jews are false brothers and potential fratricides. Cuypers and Witztum recognize that the story is mainly polemical against the Jews (Robinson 2001; Cuypers 2009, 214; Witztum 2011, 145–149). Bell suggests that the story should be revealed in Mecca, or at least before the permission to fight, because of Abel's inaction. Busse agrees with that but supports his argument with the phrase "*wa-tlu 'alayhim*" typical in the late Meccan *sūras* (Busse 2001). Muqātil understands this phrase as addressing the Meccans (Muqātil 2002, 1:468).

human instruction (al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:199). This interpretation appears less persuasive, considering that the Qurʾān has already incorporated numerous biblical narratives, and Q 5:15 does not imply the concealment of stories in a literal sense. There seems to be no motive for veiling this particular tale. The emphasis, instead, is on disregarding the divine covenant and deviating from His law, Sharīʿa, as indicated in Q 5:13, 32, and 43–45.

Al-Biqāʾī (d. 885/1480), renowned for his expertise in revealing the coherence of the Qurʾānic text and extensively consulting the Bible in his exegesis, proposes multiple interpretations, with some based on extra-Qurʾānic narrations and not solely on the Qurʾānic tale itself. Initially, he connects it with Q 5:18: “The Jews and the Christians say, ‘We are the sons of God and His beloved ones,’” and Q 5:13: “So for their breaking of the covenant We cursed them” arguing that this narrative invalidates their claim to divine sonship. Cain, born in Paradise according to certain traditions, suffered punishment when he violated his covenant. Thus, even a direct descendant of Adam, particularly one born in Paradise—the abode of honor—cannot assert divine sonship. This claim stands even more firmly against those lesser than him (al-Biqāʾī 1969, 6:112–115).

Al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868) echoed this sentiment in his discourse about the qualification for leadership (*imāma*), arguing that kinship does not guarantee it; rather, it hinges on virtuous deeds. The tale of Adam’s murderous son, whose lineage did not benefit him after his crime and self-condemnation to Hell, attests to this (al-Jāḥiẓ 1991, 208).

Secondly, al-Biqāʾī suggests that the disbelief of the Children of Israel in Muḥammad sprang from envy. Hence, the story of Adam’s sons serves as a reminder that envy breeds actions displeasing to God and to rational beings that ultimately lead to Hellfire (al-Biqāʾī 1969, 6:112–115). Al-Aṣamm (d. 200/816) also purportedly made a similar argument (al-Jushamī 2019, 3:1933).

Thirdly, al-Biqāʾī suggests that the Children of Israel, having been allotted lands and settled, fell into idleness and complacency, inciting envy and hatred. This narrative thus operates as a warning to the Muslim community and a deterrent against committing similar acts following the consummation of their religion, the death of their Prophet, and their dominion over the entire religion. An abundance of blessings often leads to envy, hatred, and strife (al-Biqāʾī 1969, 6:112–115). This justification seems to be based on the understanding that the two sons of Adam here are not direct descendants of him, but two from the Israelites, an opinion rejected by most commentators because of the verse that portrays Cain learning of the burial of human bodies, since humans should have known about burial long before the Israelites (cf. al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:323).

4 The Offering and the Divine Selection

And recite unto them, with truth, the account of Adam's two sons, when they each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them, though not accepted from the other. One said, "I will surely slay you!" [The other] said, "God accepts only from the reverent."

Q 5:27

4.1 *Why the Offering?*

The Qur'ān does not disclose the reason behind the offerings. The most prevalent extra-Qur'ānic narrative suggests that the cause stemmed from a fraternal dispute regarding their sisters—specifically, the question of matrimonial rights. The divine law of that era stipulated that each son should marry a non-twin sister, yet one of Adam's sons, Cain (Qābil), contested this law, either because of the superior beauty of his twin or on account of their heavenly lineage or for other undisclosed reasons. They brought their conflict to Adam, who proposed offering a sacrifice to resolve their dispute (Muqātil 2002, 1:469–470). In contrast, al-Ṭabarī introduces two alternative possibilities: first, that God instructed them to present the sacrifice as an act of worship, and secondly, that it was an unsolicited act of devotion (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:317).

Al-Ṭabarī then expands on these possibilities, underscoring the irrelevance of these narrative particulars, and advises a focus on what the verses themselves suggest. He asserts, "God informed His servants about them, that they presented [a sacrifice], but He did not specify whether their offering was at His command or not. It could have been at His behest, or it might not have been. Regardless, they did not present it except in pursuit of closeness to God." This statement, however, conflicts with Abel's suggestion that Cain lacked piety, i.e., sincerity, as we will see (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:325).

Likewise, al-Māturīdī appears dismissive of these details, preferring to understand the story as retold in the Qur'ān: "But we do not know how the story unfolded or its context. Were they sons of Adam from his loins, or were they not? We do not need to know this. Our requirement is only to understand the wisdom and knowledge within it so that one might comprehend that and act upon it" (al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:199).

The ambiguity of the Qur'ānic tale did not prevent interpreters from scratching their heads over the reasons for Cain's wrath and the subsequent fratricide. There must have been some substantial interest behind the offering that could incite such an act, such as a woman, a religious position, or reputation, as Muqātil hints. Al-Jāḥiẓ remarks that God used the sacrifice as a test for the Children of Israel, examining their sincerity and discerning the

truthfulness of their intentions. They make offerings; if an individual is sincere, a fire will descend from the sky and consume the offering. If the offering remains untouched, they conclude that the individual harbored corruption in his heart and that his intentions are insincere (al-Jāḥiẓ 1996, 4:461–462).

Some Muslim scholars recognized the problematic nature of this ritual of offering: it exposes and unveils the persons, and their inner-self and intentions become stripped in front of the public gaze and judgment, leading to shame, social ostracism, and a stigmatizing mark, since some biblical narrations tell us about Cain's mark after committing murder (cf. Unterseher 2014). The acceptance of such an offering implies sanctity, social approval, and perhaps religious leadership.

Al-Ṭabarī deftly observed that “offerings of past nations were akin to the charities and alms of our [nation], except that their offerings were known to be accepted or rejected since fire would consume what was accepted from them and leave what was not. The offering in our nation is righteous deeds, like prayer, fasting, charity for the impoverished, and payment of the compulsory alms, and there is no way to know in the present [life] what is accepted and what is rejected” (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:327).

Al-Jāḥiẓ recognizes the problematic nature of this practice and proposes an interesting justification. He presumes that such a practice was suitable for that particular era and aligned with the nature of people, who, in the infancy of the human race, were characterized by obstinacy and ignorance, so they needed a strategy that would effectively influence them to act righteously. Otherwise, they will be damned with shame and social ostracism (al-Jāḥiẓ 1996, 4:461–462).

These insights are based on the understanding that the Islamic system of worship and rituals maintains a sphere of constructive ambiguity or “veil of ignorance”, as the believers remain unaware of the outcome of their actions, let alone each other's actions, until the hereafter. This system cancels shame from the religious space and promotes moral and religious equality among believers. It is a moral system based on moral merit, not direct divine promotion.

4.2 *The Reason for Rejecting One's Offering*

The Qur'ān does not explain how the brothers discerned that one offering was accepted while the other was not. The prevalent narrative, however, is that fire descended from the sky and consumed the accepted offering, referring to Q 3:83. Furthermore, while the Qur'ān does not explicitly state why one brother's offering was rejected, it does hint at the reason when Abel advises his brother, “Indeed, God only accepts from the righteous” (Q 5:27). This statement indirectly criticizes Cain, insinuating that he is not among the righteous, and thus his offering was not accepted. This particular phrase has engaged scholars on account of its implications for jurisprudential, doctrinal, and ethical matters.

We will explore how these considerations have influenced, and been influenced by, the exegetes' understanding of the term *muttaqīn* within this verse. The interpretations of *muttaqīn* in this verse entail two intertwined issues. The first is doctrinal, addressing the relationship between faith and actions. The second is legal and has to do with the connection between *taqwā* and the rewarding of deeds.

Interpretations of *muttaqīn* within this verse vary among scholars, with disagreement primarily centering around two primary interpretations. The first interpretation understands the *muttaqīn* as "those who fear God and express their reverence through adherence to His obligations and avoidance of His prohibitions." The second interpretation suggests that, within this context, the *muttaqīn* are those who are not polytheists (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:326), disbelievers (*kuffār*), or hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) as attributed to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and others (cf. al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:200). Further interpretations will be discussed later.

4.3 *The Theological Question of Faith and Deeds*

Does faith need deeds as a component and prerequisite, i.e., is faith ineffectual without moral conduct? This question catalyzes one of the earliest theological disputes among the Kharijīs, the Murjī'a, Ahl al-Sunna, and the Mu'tazilīs. The Kharijīs drew first on this verse to bolster their doctrine. Ibn Naṣr al-Marwazī (d. 294/906) observed that some sects, such as the Kharijīs, quoted numerous verses as evidence that all acts of obedience are called faith, Islam, and religion. They substantiated their argument with this story, illustrating how a person who did not deny his Lord but offered sacrifice was at a loss after slaying his brother. They strengthened their statement by noting that Iblīs became a disbeliever by refusing a single prostration that God had commanded him to perform (al-Marwazī 1986, 1:395). The Kharijīs' interpretation hinges on textual evidence, namely *innamā* which implies restriction and limitation. Consequently, the rewarding of deeds is conclusively confined to the pious. Thus, reward does not exist for anyone other than the pious (al-Ṭūfī 2005, 214).

Similarly, the Mu'tazilīs utilized this verse to support their stance on the necessity of aligning faith with deeds, arguing that faith, without a practical moral basis—even if not outright rejected—is weak and indecisive and resides in a liminal position. The Mu'tazilī Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm (d. 200/816) proposed that the *taqwā* in this verse refers to the *taqwā* of the heart, i.e., sincerity, "and *taqwā* is a condition for accepting sacrifices and other forms of worship" (al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:200). Al-Jushamī (d. 994/1101) understood it in line with Mu'tazilī dogma, that is avoiding grave sins (*kabā'ir*) (al-Jushamī 2019, 3:1934). Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143) clarified his position, stating that this verse is "evidence that God only accepts obedience from a believing, pious individual,

for He deprives most religious practitioners of their deeds" (al-Zamakhsharī, 1987, 1:624).

However, the majority of Sunnī theologians and exegetes refuted this argument by presenting various interpretations of the word "*muttaqīn*." Al-Ṭūfī stated:

The intended meaning is special *taqwā*, which is the avoidance of disbelief. Accordingly, we do not concede that the sinner is not pious. We do not concede that every person who is not pious will not have their deeds accepted. Evidence for what we have mentioned is: "And what prevented their expenditures from being accepted from them but that they disbelieved in God and His Messenger and that they come not to prayer except while they are lazy and do not spend except while they are reluctant" (Q 9:54). So, He confined the prevention of accepting expenditure to disbelief, implying that nothing may prevent the rewarding of deeds except disbelief.

AL-ṬŪFĪ, 2005, 214

The Muʿtazilīs and Kharijīs responded to this interpretation, contending that a disbeliever or polytheist would not offer a sacrifice. In response, al-Māturīdī proposed that disbelievers might offer a sacrifice to assert the veracity of their religion.

To avoid falling into the doctrines of the Kharijīs or Muʿtazilīs, the majority of Sunnī commentators, as confirmed by Ibn ʿAṭīyya (d. 541/1147), inclined towards interpreting *taqwā* here as the avoidance of polytheism. However, Ibn ʿAṭīyya himself leans towards interpreting *taqwā* here as the avoidance of disobedience. He supports his interpretation with a legal ruling that mandates self-defense if the aggressor is a disbeliever or polytheist, according to the unanimous agreement of Muslims. Since Abel did not defend himself, this implies that his brother was neither a disbeliever nor a polytheist (Ibn ʿAṭīyya 2002, 2:179).

Given the problematic nature of both interpretations, exegetes proposed other hermeneutical solutions, including:

- Sincerity: al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1274) and al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209) assume that Cain did not ardently strive to perform his worship exclusively for God's sake (al-Ṭūsī 1989, 3:493–494; al-Rāzī 2000, 11:339). Hence, according to al-Ṭūsī, if a disobedient person performs worship with sincerity, it should be accepted, even though he might have committed capital crimes. This interpretation seems plausible in the context of the Qurʾān, yet, how does Abel know about the lack of his brother's sincerity?

- Denial of Divine Law: Abū Ḥayyān (d. 745/1344) opined that Cain rejected adherence to the divine directive regarding marriage and insisted on marrying his twin sister (Abū Ḥayyān 2000, 4:229). This, although depending on extra-Qurʾānic details, makes sense in the context of the *sura*, where Jews were criticized for the negligence of their laws.
- *Innamā*: This particle does not suggest exclusivity but rather definite affirmation, in this case, of the rewarding of the pious. Al-Ṭūfi argues it should be understood as an emphatic particle equivalent to “*inna*” (al-Ṭūfi 2005, 214).
- Prognostic lack of *taqwā*: Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) suggests that “when the sons of Adam offered a sacrifice, the one whose sacrifice was rejected was not a disbeliever at that time, but he disbelieved afterward; if he had been a disbeliever, he would not have offered a sacrifice.” Furthermore, the righteous generations (*salaf*) reportedly feared this verse as it threatened the rewarding of their worship; even though they were not disbelievers or polytheists, they were apprehensive about a potential lack of sincerity or piety (Ibn Taymiyya 1995, 7:495).
- Divine Statement: al-Jushamī and al-Rāzī mention that some scholars asserted that this sentence is not from the speech of Abel but rather from God’s speech to His Prophet Muḥammad—a parenthetical clause, as if God clarified to Muḥammad that he did not accept Cain’s sacrifice because he was not pious (al-Jushamī 2019, 3:1933; al-Rāzī 2000, 11:339). This might be a plausible solution supported by similar verses in the Qurʾān, in which there is a shift in speech (e.g., Q 3:37, 3:73, 63:1). But looking at the rest of Abel’s speech, this statement seems in coherence with his self-aggrandizing and critical tone.
- An Old Law: Ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1393/1973) argues that most interpretations distort the conventional sense of *taqwā* and its usage in the Qurʾān just to defend a specific doctrinal position against the Kharijīs. A more plausible solution might be to assume “that this was their law, then it was abrogated in Islam by rewarding the good deeds of the believer, even if some of his actions lacked in piety” (Ibn ‘Āshūr 1984, 6:170). This is a very peculiar opinion as the issue of reward is theological, and in such matters, there is no abrogation or change in divine acts.
- Observing Divine Assistance: Some Sufis suggest that *taqwā* means “acknowledging and observing the divine backing behind one’s good deeds.” Al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) holds that the rejection of Cain’s sacrifice was due to his illusion that his worship was his own deserved effort, not the result of divine support and guidance (al-Qushayrī 2000, 1:418).

Another related, although minor, theological issue has to do with the timing of the merit of our reward, whether it is rewarded immediately or at the end of

one's life. A group of theologians (known as *aṣḥāb al-muwāfāt*) assert that we only receive and deserve our rewards at the conclusion of our lives. Otherwise, our rewards become null and void. Al-Jushamī, drawing on this story, opposes this idea and argues that rewards for worship and good deeds are merited instantaneously (al-Jushamī 2019, 3:1934).

4.4 *The Legal Question of Validity and Acceptance*

Beyond the aforementioned theological issues; jurists have discussed the relationship between the efficacy of good deeds (*ijzā'*) and their acceptance (*qabūl*), questioning whether piety (*taqwā*) is a precondition. In other words, does the acceptance of correct deeds that fulfill all conditions and requirements depend on piety?

Al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285) explored the difference between validity, acceptance, and acquittal in depth. He differentiates between deeds in which piety is considered a condition and those that are not. He categorized commanded acts into two types, the first of which encompasses actions

for which the form of its act is sufficient to achieve its benefit, like repaying debts, returning usurped property, safekeeping deposits, providing for wives and relatives, and the like. The form of this act achieves its intended purpose even if it does not involve seeking nearness to God. If a person performs this act without any intention or purpose, the act becomes valid and fulfills the obligation, and there is no need for repetition, nor is there any reward unless there was an intention to comply with the divine command.

AL-QARĀFĪ 1995, 1:329–330

The second category involves a deed

that does not become valid except with intention and purpose, like prayer, fasting, Ḥajj, purification, and all kinds of worship for which intention is required. If this category is performed without intention, it is not counted and does not fulfill the obligation, and the person is not rewarded for it.

AL-QARĀFĪ 1995, 1:329–330

Al-Qarāfī justified this theory using the story of Adam's sons, stating,

When they both offered a sacrifice, it was accepted from one of them and not from the other, although his sacrifice was in accordance with the command. This is indicated by the fact that his brother attributed the

non-acceptance to the lack of piety. If the act itself was flawed, he would have said to him, “Indeed, God accepts only the correct and righteous act,” if this is the direct cause of non-acceptance. But as this was not the case, it indicates that the act was correct and valid, but not accepted due to the lack of piety. This implies that a valid act may not be accepted, even if it fulfills an obligation and is correct in itself.

Al-Qarāfi strengthens his theory further with another verse from the story of Abraham: “And [recall] when Abraham was raising the foundations of the House and [with him] Ishmael, [saying], ‘Our Lord, accept [this] from us. Indeed, You are the Hearing, the Knowing’” (Q 2:127). Their plea for acceptance, despite their flawless fulfillment of the obligation, indicates that acceptance depends on more than mere performance of the correct act.

However, Ibn al-Shāṭ (d. 723/1333), who wrote a commentary on al-Qarāfi’s book, objected to this argument and emphasized that there is a compelling body of evidence in the Qur’ān about the necessary acceptance of valid deeds (such as Q 9:121, 18:88, 29:7, 34:37). He argues that the conclusion drawn from this story cannot stand against this fundamental principle, because it is based on an inconclusive interpretation, with the probability of other interpretations of *taqwā* such as belief or the possibility that this was a law of a previous, which has evidently been abrogated in Islam.

Without delving into the details of the counterarguments and evidence, al-Qarāfi commented in another book that “since acceptance is a matter hidden from us, and does not fall within the scope of our jurisdiction, it is disregarded by Islamic legal theorists among the characteristics of worship. This is because they only consider those aspects that fall within our jurisdiction, guided by known or presumed criteria. Acceptance does not fall into this category; hence, it is omitted” (al-Qarāfi 1995, 1:329–330; cf. al-Harawī 2002, 8:3155).

What is relevant to our case here is the rebuttal of Ibn al-Shāṭ against the evidence of Abraham’s supplication. He opined that al-Qarāfi’s interpretation is not conclusive or compelling. Ibn al-Shāṭ seems skeptical about depending on Qur’ānic stories to extract legal rulings. In his opinion, hermeneutically, the narrated deeds are prone to many interpretive possibilities, all of which are equally strong, unlike discursive statements, in which there is a clear and direct order or prohibition. Therefore, if an interpreter provides another interpretation of Abraham’s statement, it is of the same strength as the first interpretation because of the lack of textual support. Abraham’s statement might have a didactic purpose, i.e., to teach people how to pray and to ask God for acceptance and reward. In sum, these interpretive possibilities cannot stand against the established principle of divine acceptance of good and valid deeds (al-Qarāfi 1928, 2:50–55).

We have already mentioned that legal theorists have managed to solve the indecisiveness of actions utilizing context, textual hints, and rationale. Nonetheless, many scholars lean towards speech in the case of the clash between words and deeds. Without unraveling this hermeneutic hindrance, the recourse to the Qur'ānic narrative for legal and moral guidance will remain obstructed and limited.

5 Abel's Pacificism

Even if you stretch forth your hand against me to slay me, I shall not stretch forth my hand against you to slay you. Truly I fear God, Lord of the worlds.

Q 5:28

This verse implies that Abel did not intend to defend himself despite being threatened by his brother, something which seems problematic rationally and legally for many scholars. Hence, they offered various interpretations of Abel's statement and reaction. Reports from Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687) and 'Ikrima (d. 105/723) suggest that Abel meant, "I will not initiate the killing of you," which does not necessarily imply that he would not defend himself. Mujāhid (d. 104/722) maintained that it was the law of that time not to defend oneself (Abū Ḥayyān 2000, 4:229).

However, al-Ṭabarī dismissed the notion that Abel surrendered to his impending murder by shifting the focus from the statement's literal sense to its pragmatic purpose. In his view, Abel's statement was not one of intent but of principle. Abel wished to convey to his brother his belief in the prohibition of murder and his steadfast refusal to commit such a crime. Therefore, the verse does not confirm whether Abel defended himself or not. Al-Ṭabarī supports his interpretation with narrations that detail how Cain assassinated Abel in his sleep by crushing his head with a rock. Additionally, "There is no evidence in the verse that he [Abel] was commanded not to defend himself" (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:320–328). It is clear here that al-Ṭabarī's interpretation leans on extra-Qur'ānic narrations to bolster his argument against the claim of surrender.

Nonetheless, this interpretation reveals the inherent tension between a statement's explicit and direct meaning and its implicit and nuanced connotations. The rhetorical interpretation espoused by al-Ṭabarī and other exegetes presents inconsistencies when evaluated against his comprehension of Abel's other statements.

When Abel declared, “God accepts only from the pious” no exegete confined it to its direct, literal sense as a statement of fact. Given the context, the inference went beyond the literal sense to encompass an implied message: God did not accept a sacrifice from his brother on account of his lack of piety, while he accepted the sacrifice of Abel because of his righteousness. Otherwise, we would not have all the previous theological and legal dilemmas.

Secondly, the presumption that the statement is about initiating murder is not congruent with the sentence structure for two primary reasons: the conditional format of the sentence and the use of the phrase “stretching the hand.” The apodosis “I shall not stretch forth my hand against you” depends on the protasis “If you stretch forth your hand against me.” Assuming that the consequent clause establishes a fact or a principle, it morphs into an independent sentence, thereby negating the conditional structure entirely.

Furthermore, if Cain “stretched his hand,” i.e., initiated the act of killing, Abel is left with two choices: to either “stretch his hand” in self-defense or refrain from doing so. Otherwise, the interpretation of the statement might be akin to: “If you *start* killing me, I will not *start* killing you,” which is banal. Yet, the statement does not exclude that Abel would flee or attempt to defend himself, resorting to an alternative means other than causing fatal harm to his brother. While it is feasible to consider that the exchange may be rhetorical or hyperbolic, aiming to show Abel’s peaceful and pious demeanor, this argument inadvertently undermines Abel’s position once Cain initiates his attack.

5.1 *Imitating Abel’s Pacifism*

This verse was the focus of legal debate between jurists on the ethics of self-defense: whether it is permitted, obligatory, or prohibited.

First: Obligation of Surrender: al-Māturīdī cites an unidentified group asserting that it is obligatory to imitate Abel, i.e., refrain from self-defense against an attacker. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) and others claim that this group was part of the Ḥashwiyya, a term usually referring to *muḥaddithūn* (*ḥadīth* experts). They use this story and several *ḥadīths* to substantiate their view, such as: “Indeed, the two sons of Adam have been presented as an example for this community. So, take heed of the good one of the two.”⁴ They also cite the *ḥadīth* of Abū Dharr, wherein the Prophet advised him against retaliation, and the actions

4 Narrated by Abū Dāwūd 2009, 6:315, *Kitāb al-Fitan* (“Book of Havocs”), *Bāb al-Nahy ‘an al-Sa’y fi al-Fitna* (“Chapter on Forbidding the Participation in Havoc”), no 4259; Ibn Māja 2009, 5:108, *Abwāb al-Fitan* (“Chapters on Havocs”), *Bāb al-Tathabbut fi al-Fitna* (“Chapter on Verification in Case of Havoc”), no 3961; Aḥmad 2001, 32:504, no 19730.

of ‘Uthmān (d. 35/655), who surrendered himself and forbade others from defending him (al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:199; al-Jaṣṣāṣ 1985, 4:45).

Second: Permissibility of Self-Defense: A second group of scholars maintained that an attacked individual has the choice either to defend himself after warning the attacker or to refrain from defense and surrender instead. They support their view with several verses, including the following: “And if one of them carries out aggression against the other, fight against the one who aggresses until it returns to God’s ordinance” (Q 2:194). Notable supporters of this opinion include al-Māturīdī, al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), and al-Qarāfī. Al-Qarāfī attributes the following statement to al-Bāqillānī: “The greatest thing to defend is your life, but it is up to you to surrender or defend yourself. However, during times of turmoil, surrender is more appropriate to minimize damage, while in peaceful times, it is optional to defend or surrender” (al-Qarāfī 1982, 4:184).

Al-Qarāfī adds another argument: when faced with two conflicting harms (killing or being killed), they must be weighed against each other. Letting others inflict harm is considered a lesser evil than committing harm oneself. Thus, in the case of a conflict, more significant harm should be avoided—i.e., killing. Therefore, surrendering is perceived as the less harmful option (al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:199; al-Qarāfī 1982, 4:184).

Third: Obligation of Self-Defense, even if it entails killing: This position is held by numerous scholars and jurists. For instance, al-Jaṣṣāṣ adamantly argued that self-defense is not merely permissible but obligatory. He cited the verse: “There is security of life for you in the law of retribution” (Q 2:179). His rationale is that an aggressor intending to kill another becomes deserving of death, and his life is forfeited. Thus, killing this aggressor is an act of preserving another life that does not deserve death. He further defends this view with *ḥadīths* affirming self-defense of life and property, such as: “Whoever is killed in defense of himself is a martyr, and whoever is killed defending his family is a martyr, and whoever is killed defending his property is a martyr.”⁵ Thus, he concluded that a person must defend himself and others, even if it leads to killing, as long as no other alternative exists. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ contends that Abel intended to express the position that he would not initiate murder. Furthermore, assuming that this was a form of surrender, it should be considered an old abrogated law.

5 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 3:136, *Kitāb al-Maẓālīm wa-l-Ghaṣb* (“Book of Injustices and Illegal Seizure”), *Bāb man Qātal Dūna Mālīh* (“Chapter on Who Died Defending His Property”), no 2480; Muslim 1991, 1:124, *Kitāb al-Īmān* (“Book of Faith”), *Bāb al-Dalīl ‘alā anna man Qaṣada Akhdh Māl Ghayrih bi-Ghayr Ḥaqq Kāna al-Qāṣid Muḥdar al-Damm* (“Chapter on The Evidence That Whoever Intends to Unlawfully Seize The Property of Someone, His Blood Will Be Unavenged”), no 141.

He argues that legislating surrender does not contradict reason and may have been the law at the time, much like Jesus's Law and the law during the early years of Islam, when Muḥammad was not permitted to retaliate against aggression (cf. al-Ṭūsī 1989, 3:494–495).

A potential rebuttal to this argument is that the right to kill is dependent upon the actual occurrence of the act. In this case, the assailant has not yet committed the crime, so why should he be killed? Al-Jaṣṣāṣ responds that an assailant intending to kill another without just cause falls within the scope of retaliatory laws that aim at preserving the lives of the innocent. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ then outlines the implications of the pacifist position, stating that it could lead to abandoning the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, empowering the wicked to seize control of the land and to govern according to laws other than those of God. This position, according to Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, could bring immeasurable harm to Islam and Muslims (al-Jaṣṣāṣ 1985, 4:47–48).

Ibn ʿĀshūr offers another possible interpretation of Abel's statement, suggesting that Abel was asserting his understanding of the enormity of taking a life, even in self-defense. Abel viewed his surrender to Cain as a means of upholding the sanctity of human life, even if those seeking to kill were unjust. Ibn ʿĀshūr also maintains that this may have reflected previous divine laws.

It is noteworthy that this issue is usually discussed by jurists under the concept of self-defense (*dafʿ al-ṣāʾil*). However, Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) discusses it in the context of enjoining good and forbidding evil, questioning its limits and the permissibility of using force to establish justice. Ibn Ḥazm argues that a Muslim who allows his property to be unjustly seized and himself to be beaten when he could have defended himself is aiding and abetting the aggressor, facilitating aggression and injustices, which is forbidden in the Qurʾān. Furthermore, he regards the story of Adam's sons as reflecting an old, abrogated law.

Interesting and peculiar as they are, the Brethren of Purity employed this story to advocate for believers' submission to fate (*qadar*) and contentment with the divine decree, even if it appears unjust. They argued that Jesus's acceptance of God's decree led him to accept death at the hands of the Jews to fulfill God's will. They cited other examples, such as the Prophet's actions on the day of Uhud and the submission of ʿUthmān (d. 35/655) and al-Ḥusayn (d. 61/680) to their fate (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ 1992, 4:74).⁶

6 Busse considers this verse reminiscent of Christian tradition, where Abel is considered a prefiguration of the crucifixion of Jesus (Busse 2001). For more on this, see Byron 2011, 75.

6 The Problem of Evil

I desire that you should be burdened with my sin and your sin and so become one of the inhabitants of the Fire. Such is the recompense of the wrongdoers.

Q 5:29

Is the will or wish for evil to occur to others morally reprehensible? This issue involves two questions: theological and legal.

6.1 *Does God Will Evil?*

The theological question is whether God wills evil and whether such a notion is valid. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 324/935) cites the story of the two sons of Adam as a support for his argument that God wills every existing being, even disbelief. According to al-Ashʿarī, Abel desired for his brother to kill him, to inherit the sin of murder along with his own sins, and eventually to join the inhabitants of Hell. However, he was not depicted in the Qurʾān as absurd or unreasonable. Hence, if God wills the disobedience of His servants, His Will should not be described as absurd or unreasonable (al-Ashʿarī 1977, 171–173). He argues against the Muʿtazilīs, who reject the idea that God wills any form of evil whatsoever. Al-Ashʿarī challenges them by asking: If wanting evil is inherently evil, how can Abel's statement be reconciled with their view?

In the same theological debate with the Muʿtazilīs, Ibn Ḥazm cites this story to support his opinion that it is permissible to will disbelief for some people in certain circumstances. Moses and Aaron also prayed, “Our Lord, cover their wealth and harden their hearts so that they will not believe until they see the painful punishment.” God responded, “Your prayers have been answered” (Q 10:88; Ibn Ḥazm n.d., 390).

Ibn Ḥazm does not draw upon the circumstances where such supplications are laudable but rather summons another problematic verse that long puzzled the exegetes because of its moral implications. For example, al-Māturīdī relates that such a prayer is only possible after divine revelation, while al-Ṭūsī maintains that this should not be understood as prayer but a report; or that it was after long, hopeless calls for belief, which makes sense since this prayer came directly before crossing the sea, marking the end of Moses' mission and his despair of their belief (al-Māturīdī 2005, 7:101; al-Ṭūsī 1989, 5:422–424).

The Muʿtazilīs, however, rebutted the Ashʿarī position. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 414/1025) states that Abel did not want his brother to commit a crime or sin. Rather, he wanted him to be punished for his crimes, should he proceed with them. Abel's entire statement should be understood as a warning and deterrent, not as an actual desire for the act of killing to occur (ʿAbd al-Jabbār n.d., 116).

Conversely, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044) raises the question of how one can wish for punishment for something that has not yet happened, like the act of killing, which had not yet taken place in reality. He argues that this is possible under the condition that the event deserving punishment will eventually occur. For example, when Abel saw his brother's determination to kill him and commit the heinous act, he was sure that the event would take place; thus, he desired the punishment (al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā 1954, 2:47).

Al-Māturīdī approaches the issue in his unique and somewhat complex way by distinguishing between love (*maḥabba*) and contentment (*riḍā*) and between divine will (*irāda*) and divine volition (*mashī'a*). He differentiates between the will for an action to be committed by a sinner and the will for the sin itself. He considers the first case as permissible, while the latter is reprehensible. For example, God may will the sinful action of an unbeliever to take place without willing the actual sin itself. Hence, Abel's will that his brother commits a crime is not the same as his will to commit a crime; the latter is reprehensible (al-Māturīdī 2001, 387).

The issue of the will for evil is a complex theological and jurisprudential question. Furthermore, for many commentators, the theory leads the interpretations not the other way around, leading to many inconsistent and convoluted interpretations. Yet, the differing views on this matter reveal the depth and complexity of ethical dilemmas related to Qur'ānic narratives.

6.2 *The Legal Issue of Wishing Evil upon Others*

From a jurisprudential perspective, al-Qarāfī delves into the issue of supplicating for evil, questioning its permissibility. While initially speaking of prohibiting such supplications, he further distinguishes between desiring evil in essence and desiring it incidentally, emphasizing that the intent should not be inherently evil. Citing the story of Adam's sons, he says,

Abel's intention was solely to avoid being killed, not for his brother to commit the sin of murder. The corollary of this wish is that his brother be the one who commits the sin of murder. However, this corollary is incidental and not intended. Thus, such a wish should not be considered forbidden or evil.

He supports his opinion with the *ḥadīth*: "Be the murdered servant of God, and be not the murderer servant of God."⁷ Here, the Prophet advises the believer to prefer being killed over committing murder, indicating that the primary

⁷ Narrated by Aḥmad 2001, 34:542, no 21064.

intention is to distance oneself from evil; hence, any other resulting harm is incidental (al-Qarāfi 1928, 4:295).

Al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) concurs with al-Qarāfi in distinguishing between the essential and the incidental, but he addresses the issue in a different context. He presents an ethical dilemma: how should one act if protecting oneself and one's property may cause harm to someone else? For instance, if an unjust ruler demands that a non-specified man from a village be brought to him for execution, fleeing from the threat of being killed might inadvertently lead to the death of another person. Is fleeing an ethical choice?

Al-Shāṭibī argues that the right of the one bringing benefit or preventing harm takes precedence over any unintended harm that may befall others. Bringing benefits or repelling harm is a foundational principle in Islamic law, Shari'a. Yet, some laws (like punishments) may entail harm and damage for some individuals, but since this harm is not the intended outcome, and there is a more substantial benefit, the law is considered valid and moral. The same applies to Abel, whose right to refrain from committing a crime takes precedence over its collateral harm, which is that his brother will commit the crime (al-Shāṭibī 1997, 2:56–57).

In both views, the scholars distinguish between the primary intent and the incidental result, emphasizing that the essence of an act should not be evil but focus on self-preservation or the greater good. The Qur'ānic story of the Sons of Adam serves as a pivotal reference in these discussions, underscoring the complexities of ethical dilemmas and hermeneutical issues related to religious narratives and Scripture.

A majority of exegetes seem to have been significantly influenced by earlier ethical considerations, which spurred them to explore alternative interpretations. Evidently, most exegetes felt discomfort with al-Ash'arī's stance, which held that the righteous brother's intention to inflict harm on his sibling constituted an ethical act. Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, known for his inclination towards the Mu'tazilīs, assertively declared it impermissible for anyone to wish or command someone else to commit a sin (al-Jaṣṣāṣ 1985, 4:48). Several interpretations have been proposed, in addition to those previously discussed:

1. There is an omitted condition in the verse: al-Ṭabarī argues that the meaning is, "I wish you would bear the consequences of my killing me because I will not kill you. And *if you kill me*, then I wish you to bear the sin of killing me." Thus, his wish does not imply his brother committing the crime (al-Ṭabarī 2001, 8:332).
2. Another interpretation, proposed by al-Māturīdī, suggests that the term "I want" (*urīdu*) can be used metaphorically to signify what is expected to happen or the outcome of a situation (al-Māturīdī 2005, 4:204).

Al-Māturīdī supports his interpretation with Q 18:77: “They found in that town a wall that was on the verge (*yurīdu*) of tumbling down.” It was used metaphorically to denote the expected result had the murder taken place.

3. Abel’s wish surfaced when the act of killing was overwhelmingly perceived: In this scenario, Abel’s intention emerged when he realized that his brother was bound to kill him (al-Qurṭubī 1964, 6:137).
4. Another contentious linguistic solution posits an embedded negation particle, “*lā*,” in the sentence, meaning, “I wish you would not bear the consequences of my sin.” The implied “*lā*” is a common solution to clarify the sense of various verses from the Qur’ān and Arabic poetry. For example, “*an taḍillū*” (go astray) was interpreted as “*an lā taḍillū*” (not go astray) in “God clarifies to you lest you go astray” (Q 4:176). Similarly, “And He has cast into the earth firmly set mountains, lest it shifts with you” (Q 16:15), where “*an tamīda*” is translated as “*an lā tamīda*.”

Despite the numerous examples, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā does not lean towards this interpretation, stating: “This answer is considered weak by many Arabic grammarians since they do not approve of the omission of ‘*lā*’ in such a context” (al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā 1954, 2:48–49). Al-Ṭūsī maintains that such an interpretation is only acceptable if evidence suggests that it is not permissible for someone to wish sin for others. Since there is no such evidence, the insertion of *lā* is contrary to the apparent meaning of the verse (al-Ṭūsī 1989, 3:496–497). Additionally, al-Qurṭubī brings in *ḥadīth* that supports the apparent meaning of the verse, “No soul is killed unjustly but the first son of Adam bears a part of the debt of its blood, because he was the first to introduce killing” (al-Qurṭubī 1964, 6:137).

Abū Ḥayyān rebuts al-Qurṭubī, saying that the one who denies the intention of killing is not necessarily implying that the murder will not take place. Indeed, he might not want it, yet it occurs nevertheless. Abū Ḥayyān and al-Māwardī admit the embedding of *lā*, arguing that murder is heinous, that the desire for such an act is reprehensible, and that it is even more so coming from the prophets (Abū Ḥayyān 2000, 4:231).

5. Another interpretation discusses a non-canonical variant reading where the affirmative “*innī*” is replaced with the interrogative particle “*annā*,” which translates to, “How could I wish to bear my sin!” (al-Samīn al-Ḥalabī n.d., 4:241).
6. Some scholars proposed the presumption of an embedded interrogative particle, i.e., “*a-innī*,” transforming an affirmative sentence into a rhetorical question: “Do I really wish that you commit such a crime?” (al-Qurṭubī 1964, 6:137).

7. Ibn 'Aṭiyya suggests that Abel desired the lesser of two evils. His wish, while not favorable or desirable, was less harmful than killing. Consequently, he chose to be a victim in this life and expected compensation in the hereafter (Ibn 'Aṭiyya 2002, 2:179).

These diverse interpretive efforts demonstrate the exegetes' concern about the ethical complexities that arise from this story in the Qur'ānic text. They sought various interpretative paths that preserved Abel's image as "the best of the two sons of Adam."

6.3 *Accountability for Others' Sins*

In numerous verses, the Qur'ān establishes the general ethical principle of individual responsibility; affirming that no one be held accountable for another's deeds. The statement "no bearer of a burden shall bear the burden of another" occurs five times in the Qur'ān (6:164, 17:15, 35:18, 39:7, 53:38). Nonetheless, some verses may indicate that some people may bear additional burden (Q 29:13, 16:25).⁸ Abel's statement implies that an individual can be held accountable for another's wrongdoing and may bear a burden of sin more significant than the consequences of their own actions.

Early scholars disregarded this indication and interpreted the verse as follows: "You bear the sin of killing me and to your preceding wrongdoings." This interpretation has been adopted by the majority of scholars (Muqātil 2002, 1:470; 'Abd al-Jabbār n.d., 116; 'Abd al-Jabbār 1966, 289–291; al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā 1954, 2:46–50). Thus, both sins mentioned in the verse belong to Cain, who does not bear any of Abel's burden. This interpretation is not convincing. First, it twists the wording of Abel, who mentions two sins. Secondly, wishing for Cain to bear the responsibility for his preceding wrongdoings is irrelevant in the context of facing murder. According to this interpretation, Abel's statement would lose its vigor and the intended effect of deterring his brother.

Ibn 'Aṭiyya added two other interpretations: the first is that the sins include Cain's act of killing and his animosity towards Abel, even if he did not carry out the act. The second is that the sins include the act of killing and any sin Abel would commit if he engaged in a fight. He supported this interpretation with a *ḥadīth*: "When two Muslims confront each other with their swords,

8 Draz reads these verses as a confirmation of the rule of individual responsibility. These verses come in a context where we have two parties: leaders and followers. "The leaders have contributed to a certain extent to the followers' guilt, they can be charged with extra responsibility, because of the law of cause and effect between their own crime and the others. They are doubly responsible precisely because they are doubly guilty." At the same time, their followers will not be exempted from their sins (Draz 2008, 75–76).

both the killer and the killed will be in Hell.”⁹ This interpretation is based on the assumption that Abel would defend himself, which is negated in the previous verse.

Another interpretation, based on a *ḥadīth*, states: “On the Day of Judgment, the oppressor and the oppressed will be brought forth, and the oppressor’s good deeds will be taken and given to the oppressed until justice is served. If the oppressors have no good deeds, then the oppressed’s sins will be taken and placed upon them.”¹⁰ In this sense, it is plausible that some of Abel’s sins might be transferred to Cain as recompense for his crime (Ibn ‘Aṭīyya 2002, 2:179).

This particular interpretation appears to be the most relevant for several reasons. First, it remains faithful to the overt and apparent meaning of the text, eliminating the need for further conjecture. Secondly, it allows the statement to retain its robust impact and sway. It serves as a stern caution to Cain that, within the framework of divine justice in the afterlife, Abel’s untimely demise will be recompensed by crediting his sins to Cain’s account, thereby restoring a just equilibrium (cf. Draz 2008, 121).

Nonetheless, traditional exegeses have painted an idealized portrait of Abel’s character, which may have blinded commentators to this viable interpretation. This understanding requires fewer textual interventions and resolves many of the moral quandaries they confronted.

7 The Emergence of Evil: Is the Human Soul Inherently Predisposed to Evil?

Then his soul prompted him to slay his brother, and he slew him, and thus came to be among the losers.

Q 5:30

9 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 1:15, *Kitāb al-Īmān* (“Book of Faith”), *Bāb wa-in Ṭā’ifatān min al-Muslimīn Iqtatalū fa Aṣliḥū Baynahumā* (“When Two Groups of Muslims Fight, Reconcile Between Them”), no 31; Muslim 1991, 4:2213, *Kitāb al-Fitan wa-Ashrāt al-Sā’a* (“Book of Havocs and the Portents of the Day of Judgment”), *Bāb Idhā Tawājaha al-Muslimān bi-Sayfayhimā* (“Chapter on When Two Muslims Face Each Other With Their Swords”), no 2888.

10 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 3:129, *Kitāb al-Maẓālim wa-l-Ghaṣb* (“Book of Injustices and Illegal Seizure”), *Bāb man Kanat lahū Maḥlama Inda al-Rajuli fa-Ḥalalahā lahū, Hal Yabīnu Maḥlamatahū* (“Chapter on Who Has a Right Against Someone and Waives it, Would He Be Forsaken”), no 2449; Muslim 1991, 4:1997, *Kitāb al-Birr wa-l-Ṣila wa-l-Ādāb* (“Book on Piety, Kinship and Manners”), *Bāb Tahrim al-Zulm* (“Chapter on Forbidding Injustice”), no 2581.

When the Qurʾān recounts the sin committed by Adam, it ascribes this transgression to Satan's incitement. In contrast, in the case of Cain, the motivation appears to originate within his own self. Nevertheless, early narratives attribute this action to Satan's influence, suggesting that he instigated the idea of murder and taught Cain how to execute it.

Some exegetes tend to focus on the Qurʾānic expression “*ṭawwaʿat lahū nafsuhū*” (his soul prompted or inclined him), implying that the human soul grapples with two competing drives—one oriented towards goodness and the other towards evil. Ibn ʿAṭīyya proposes that the act of killing inherently imposes a severe burden on the soul, but in this instance, it was Cain's rebellious and wicked soul that persuaded him to commit the crime: “The prospect of murder beckoned this soul due to the envy and resentment consuming Cain, and although the soul initially resisted, the situation escalated, leading the soul to succumb and commit the act of murder” (Ibn ʿAṭīyya 2002, 2:179–180).

Al-Biqāʿī aligns with a similar perspective, arguing that the human soul, through reason, acknowledges the repulsion of murder and is inclined to abhor it. Engaging in such a grave action instigates a substantial internal conflict involving the subversion of rationality through various deceptive pretexts that make the act of killing seem attractive. Eventually, the soul transforms from a state of disobedience to a state of acquiescence, transitioning from resisting the act to embracing it. Moreover, Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1354/1935) emphasizes the concept of inherent disposition (*fiṭra*) that repudiates killing in general, let alone killing a relative (al-Biqāʿī 1969, 6:121; Riḍā 1990, 6:285).

Al-Qushayrī views this verse as evidence of the inherent evil predispositions of the human *nafs* and its persistent thrust against reason or what he calls “the motives of truth.” Consequently, those who indulge in their desires eventually find themselves immersed in regret, to no avail (al-Qushayrī 2000, 1:419). In other words, had Cain not been indulged in previous sins and moral violations, he would not have crossed the line and committed murder.

7.1 *Metaphorical Murder*

According to Ibn Hishām (d. 218/833), Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114/725) reported that some Muslims held the belief that Cain did not physically murder Abel but instead overwhelmed him with arguments, thereby rendering the act of killing a symbolic or metaphorical one. This is an intriguing interpretation, not just because of its import in this story but because of its relevance to the history of symbolic interpretations of the Qurʾān. It could be connected to the view that the “sons of Adam” in this context are distant descendants of Adam, namely, the Children of Israel. Both perspectives may stem from the belief that prophets' offspring are also prophets; thus, they could not commit an act so

grave as murder. However, this symbolic interpretation is idiosyncratic, and I could not find any other attestation.

The text, as narrated by Ibn Hishām, is as follows:

Wahb stated: Some people from Muḥammad's nation claim that Cain did not physically murder his brother Abel. Instead, they had a dispute in the kingdom (*malakūt*), and Cain presented a more potent argument, thereby killing him through the strength of his argument. They interpret the verse and argue that if were capable of killing one another, what about non-prophets? Their argument relies on God's statement, "We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone kills a person—unless it be in retaliation for murder or spreading corruption in the land—it is as if they had killed all humankind. And if any saves a life, it is as if they had saved the lives of all humankind." Consequently, Cain killed his brother through argumentation, not force, for no prophet has ever killed another prophet.

IBN HISHĀM 1977, 25

8 Virtue, Vice, and Moral Archetypes

The story of the two sons of Adam is one of the oldest representations of sibling rivalry, a universal literary motif, and of the two primordial archetypes, Abel and Cain, as epitomes of "good" and "evil." Abel is depicted as a paragon of righteousness, clemency, forbearance, chivalry, pacificism, and rationality. In contrast, Cain is set out as a personification of lawlessness, envy, wrath, vengeance, and caprice. Here are some of the classical and modern characterizations of the two sons of Adam.

The most common trait taken away from this story in classical literature is envy, of which Cain is the quintessential embodiment. As a story of envy, it took its place among other similar accounts in the Qur'ān, such as the narrative of Adam and Iblis and the tale of Joseph's brothers. Al-Jāhīz postulates that envy is the primordial sin that originated in the celestial sphere between Adam and Iblis and the first sin that manifested on Earth between Cain and Abel (al-Jāhīz 2003, 117).

Envy is defined as harboring disdain for the gifts granted to others and desiring their revocation. It is regarded as a reprehensible trait, denounced in numerous verses (Q 2:109, 4:54, 113:5). However, a canonical *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet says, "Envy is only justified in two cases: A man whom God endows with wealth, who then uses it judiciously, and a man whom God blesses with

knowledge, which he then applies and imparts,”¹¹ has led to identifying two sorts of envy: the one we mentioned earlier, and good envy, which is an admiration of blessings granted to others and the desire for similar blessings. The blessings meant here are usually acts of benevolence, like charity or other forms of worship. This variant of envy is referred to as *ghibṭa* or “competition.”

What was the nature of Cain’s envy? His envy might appear laudable at first glance since it reflects his aspiration for divine favor and approval. However, Cain’s progression from feeling envious to contemplating homicide implies, in my opinion, that the offering was a competition for God’s acceptance, signifying the distinctive divine favor and selection (*iṣṭifāʾ*). Therefore, the only resolution he saw was the obliteration of his rival. This behavior parallels Iblis’s reaction to Adam’s elevation when he proclaimed, “Do you see this one whom You have *exalted above me*? If You defer my penalty until the Day of Resurrection, I will assuredly lead his descendants astray, sparing only a few” (Q 17:62).

This interpretation fits well in the texture of the *sūra*, which defends the plurality of covenants (Q 5:7, 12, 14), religious leaderships, and communities (Q 5:48); and polemicizes against the monopolization of God’s love, truth, and salvation (Q 5:18). The story exemplifies the human longing for divine love and simultaneously warns against the sways of religious zeal and fanaticism (see Q 5:11, 13, 77). This sort of envy is evident in other verses such as Q 2:109 and 4:54.

Some scholars propose a characterization of Cain as a capricious and temperamental person. Cain was consumed by intense anger, leading to a confrontation with his brother and culminating in threats and murder. Ibn al-Qayyim contends that humans

possess no more potent weapon against themselves than these two: desire, which expelled their parents from Paradise, and rage, which instigated animosity among their children. It severed their familial bonds, resulted in bloodshed, and incited one of Adam’s sons to commit fratricide.

IBN AL-QAYYIM 2009, 1:240–241

Most stories based on the Qur’ānic narrative focus on the character of Cain. It seems that the evil act overshadows the character of Abel. Al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021), though, depicts Abel as a paragon of chivalry, *futuwwa*, which he defines as “agreeability and obedience, the abandonment of all objectionable

11 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 1:25, *Kitāb al-ʿIlm* (“Book of Knowledge”), *Bāb al-Ighibāt fī al-ʿIlm wa-l-Ḥikma* (“Chapter on Envy for Knowledge and Wisdom”), no 73; Muslim 1991, 1:559, *Kitāb al-Birr wa-l-Ṣila wa-l-Ādāb* (“Book on Piety, Kinship and Manners”), *Bāb Faḍl Man Yaqūmu bi-l-Qurʾān* (“Chapter on the Grace of Nightly Prayers with the Qurʾān”), no 816.

characteristics, and adherence to noble traits and virtues, both outwardly and inwardly, in private and publicly, across all contexts and times ... Chivalry involves counteracting ill-treatment with benevolence and renouncing retaliation for wrongs inflicted." He quotes Abel's words, "I will not raise my hand against you," drawing parallels with Joseph's conciliatory words to his brothers, "No blame lies on you today" (al-Sulamī 2002, 5–6).

The moral characterization of Abel and Cain did not fully crystallize into paradigms of virtue and vice until al-Ghazzī (1061/1651), whose distinctive work, *Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh li-Mā Warada fī al-Tashabbuh* ("The Merits of Moral Imitation") is dedicated to the idea of moral archetypes. Al-Ghazzī allocates an exhaustive chapter on the story of Adam's sons, scrutinizing Cain's moral failings and Abel's virtuous character. However, these characterizations are primarily based on the extra-Qur'ānic narrations, where Cain was portrayed as *the* embodiment and progenitor of all malevolence, encompassing not only murder but also polytheism, sexual indecency, and injustice. Al-Ghazzī states, "It is acknowledged that Satan is the prime father of sinners, and Cain is their subsequent patriarch" (al-Ghazzī 2011, 6:388).

Al-Ghazzī ascribes more than twenty vices to Cain. Among them are his discontent with God's law, disrespect towards his father, and a fear of societal ridicule and condemnation. He further discusses Cain's envy and resentment, his intimidation of his brother by threatening murder, and ultimately, his act of fratricide, which he designates as the most severe sin after polytheism.

In contrast, Abel epitomizes generosity as its best example. Because charity, if offered grudgingly, masks stinginess and animosity under the guise of love. "Never will you attain the good [reward] until you spend [in the way of God] from that *which you love*" (Q 3:92). Abel's character traits further incorporate patience, tolerance of harm, endurance in adversity, refraining from revenge, and avoiding reciprocation of violence with violence.

Abel's character also displays a trait with two facets: self-purification "*taz-kiyat al-naḥs*" and speaking of divine blessings "*al-taḥadduth bi-ni'mati Llāh*". The former is reproachable, while the latter is laudable. It is one action with two qualifications that diverge on account of the intent and purpose of the human agent (Ibn al-Qayyim 2011, 2:650). If the purpose is to self-aggrandize and demonstrate superiority over others, this constitutes a reprehensible form of self-purification: "So do not claim yourselves to be pure; He is most knowing of who fears Him" (Q 53:32). Al-Ghazzī argues that this vice first appeared in Cain, who perceived himself as more deserving of blessings than his brother. Consequently, anyone who sanctifies themselves and sees their own superiority resembles Cain (al-Ghazzī 2011, 6:371).

Conversely, if the intent is to disclose God's blessings and kindness, this is considered a laudable expression of gratitude and acknowledgment of God's

blessings. “and proclaim the bounty of your Lord” (Q 93:11). This holds true when the objective is to inspire others to emulate piety, reverence, and other acts of obedience. Al-Ghazzī recognizes the ambivalent and perilous nature of self-appraisal, but since Abel is portrayed as “the good guy,” al-Ghazzī conjectures that

Perhaps Abel intended, through his self-praise for piety and fear, to guide his brother towards repentance and a return to righteousness. This is appropriate if the mention of blessings is free from vanity, ostentation, or other heart-rooted disobediences encompassed by self-purification. For then it becomes ingratitude rather than gratitude.

However, al-Ghazzī neglects the problematic matter of Abel’s ill-wish and doesn’t offer any analysis or comment on it.

From an ontological perspective, Cain and Abel were depicted as symbols of reason (*‘aql*) and illusion (*wahm*) respectively. Al-Kāshānī (d. 735/1335), the famous Sufi scholar, maintains that Abel signifies the rational, scientific force that governs and accomplishes good and virtuous deeds. In contrast, Cain symbolizes illusion; the imaginative force managing sensory perceptions and deficit perceptions to acquire devilish beliefs. Al-Kāshānī discusses how each twin’s marriage to the other’s twin aimed to achieve a balance between the rational and illusionary powers in humans. He elaborates that the rejection of the offering is linked to the idea that illusion can only produce a counterfeit image that does not match the truth and thus cannot be accepted. Al-Kāshānī further elucidates the conflict between reason and illusion (Abel and Cain), explaining how illusion opposes reason, while reason recognizes the benefits of sensory perceptions since the organization of livelihoods can only be realized through illusion (al-Kāshānī n.d., fol. 58).

In modern times, besides the nonviolence inspiration of Jawdat Sa’īd, ‘Alī Sharī‘atī (d. 1977) epitomizes Cain and Abel as symbols of a world divided into two camps: the tyrants and the oppressed. He explains that both camps use religion, but the followers of Abel use it to achieve justice, while the followers of Cain exploit it for illegitimate gains (Sharī‘atī 2006, 56–61).

Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Raḥmān advocates for an Abel-centric world that rejects spiritual or material domination, a world featuring only the minimum implementation of violence, in contrast to a Cain-centric world. He describes the latter as a realm rampant with material interests, dominated by conflict, and characterized by hypocrisy and ultimately leading to destruction through warfare. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān believes that every perpetrator of violence resembles the lawless Cain. He posits that the Cain-like killer deprives victims of their

life and humanity, reducing them to an insignificant entity. Simultaneously, through this act, the killer strips himself of his humanity, descending to the depths of devilishness (‘Abd al-Raḥmān 2017, 44–50; on the universality of the story’s motifs, see Ḥilālī 2015, 52–55).

In a significant similarity, the archetype of fraternal conflict is effectively adapted in some contemporary Arabic literature, such as in Najīb Maḥfūz’s (d. 2006) novel *Awlād Ḥāratinā* (“Children of Our Alley”), and Sa’d Allāh Wannūs’s (d. 1977) works. Sebastian Günther, who studies these representations, remarks that while the motif of hostile brothers in traditional Arabic literature primarily conveys a religious or morality-focused message, modern Arabic authors have repurposed this theme to critique socioeconomic injustices in various manifestations (Günther 1999).

8.1 *Relative Archetypes*

Contrary to the prevailing characterization of the two brothers as quintessential representations of good and evil, certain scholarly perspectives contend that such interpretations are not rooted in the Qur’ānic text. Instead, it is argued that each brother possesses both virtues and vices, and their fraternal relationship overall was fraught with tension and rivalry. Abū Ḥarb argues quite convincingly that Abel’s speech is harsh and lacks compassion and empathy with a disheartened sibling. Yet, it is not essentially immoral or reprehensible. I suggest, though, that Abel’s speech reflects the character trait of someone who advocates for justice and declares the truth, even if it will lead to his death. A defining feature of the Qur’ānic retelling of the story is the verbal interaction between the two brothers. This dialogue consists of one statement from Cain, “I will kill you,” while Abel delivers an extended speech laden with moral terminology, such as righteousness, justice, and injustice. Abel presents himself as a pacifist who stands for truth and justice and respects human life. He will not get involved in a lethal fight but in a verbal rebuttal against malevolent intentions and a proclamation of just principles.

But does not Abel’s ill-wish in Q 5:29 reflect a judgmental and revengeful character trait? I contend that there isn’t compelling evidence to suggest that Abel was an impeccable individual. Nonetheless, the textual evidence supports reading the ill-wish as directly connected with the previous conditional sentence. The wish is contingent on the condition that “if you raise your hand,” then and only then would the wish for bearing sins come into play. The wish coheres with Abel’s previous statements and character as an advocate for justice.

The Qur’ān does not explicitly endorse or comment on this speech, which makes it, in my view, a moral choice that does not exclude other possibilities

addressed elsewhere in the Qur'ān, such as the divine advice to Moses before facing Pharaoh "Yet speak gently to him, that haply he may be mindful, or perchance fear" (Q 20:44). Evidently, Abel's admonishment was not an effective strategy for preventing murder; it may have even served as a provocation. It is quite possible that embedded within this is a lesson: harsh criticism, even if truthful and just, can be ineffective and potentially counterproductive.

In epitomizing the other brother, the Qur'ānic narrative, intriguingly, does not emphasize Cain's wickedness or malevolent nature, as is commonly depicted in extra-Qur'ānic narrations. First, it allocates him minimal verbiage, namely, *la-aqtulannaka* [I will indeed kill you]. Second, it illustrates his keenness to secure divine acceptance. Third, his profound internal struggle prior to committing the act. This suggests he was not innately murderous, and perhaps no one is. Fourth, the concluding verse, which was omitted from the analysis due to space limitations, sheds light on Cain's compassion, weakness, and ignorance, hinting at a potential path to redemption.

9 Conclusion

The story of the two sons of Adam is a primordial narrative that speaks to each one in a way incomparable to instructional discourse. By omitting most details of the story, such as time, place, names, and circumstances, the Qur'ānic "abstract" retelling contributed to its transformation into a paradigmatic narrative. This version serves to illuminate our human condition, transcending time and space, elucidating the intricacies of our relationships with each other and the divine. In this chapter, Abel and Cain are names used merely for the sake of convenience; "the son of Adam" does not refer to a specific person but to a human being as such.

This narrative addresses the founding structure and relationships of our society: family, fraternal ties, love, envy, spiritual aspirations, hierarchy, and differences. While many of us might navigate our entire lives without sensing the relevance of "And slay not the soul God has forbidden" (Q 17:33), the admonition against "the evil of an envier" (Q 113:5), which was often construed as superstitious, becomes palpably relevant when considering the tale of Adam's two sons. The story unveils the delicate nature of fraternal ties and the potential malevolence stemming from yearning for divine love. The story is so paradigmatic that there is a plethora of ways to find meaning in it and to identify with it.

Such narratives have two lives, one in the Qur'ān and its relevant genres; and another outside: evident in literature, art, and folklore. This study has

demonstrated how scholars read the narrative and grappled with its intricate implications, such as the ethics of self-defense, wishing ill, individual responsibility, and the innate human propensity towards malevolence. When studying such paradigmatic tales, we inevitably draw on imagination and assumptions informed by other Qur'ānic stories and verses or extra-Qur'ānic evidence. However, if the narrative has to speak for its particular structure and character, we must be minimalist in incorporating extra-Qur'ānic details, dogmas, and/or norms. The form and structure, ambiguous and abstract as they might be, are part of the narrative sense that needs to be unearthed.

This study has observed a relative lack of interest in developing coherent hermeneutics for Qur'ānic narrative, resulting in inconsistencies and ad-hoc interpretations. It has also observed how the projection of dogma onto the narrative resulted in twisted interpretations. There are numerous instances where theological perspectives based on rational argumentation were imposed on Qur'ānic verses to preserve the coherence of the dogma, not that of the Qur'ānic text.

One profound approach to the Qur'ānic narrative involves perceiving it as an integrative component of its *sūra*. The meanings of Qur'ānic tales often derive from their embeddedness within a given *sūra*. In this regard, I want to present a preliminary reflection on the context of the story of the two sons of Adam. The intertwined connections and affinities in *sūrat al-Mā'ida* and its general argument suggest that it is a tale of rivalry for divine proximity and love. The longing for divine closeness, in a metaphorical sense, while inherently noble, could potentially engender malevolence when someone deems himself exclusively worthy of divine proximity.

This interpretation fits perfectly in the *sūra*, in which three parties (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) compete over divine love and proximity (e.g., Q 5:18–19). Additionally, the narrative significantly indicates that the rationale behind divine proximity is not the arbitrary will of God, but the virtuous deeds and personal merits, which entails that divine closeness can be shared with numerous actors and is not an exclusive right. This corresponds with the verses calling for fulfilling the covenants (Q 5:7, 12–14, 70) and with the pluralistic verse 48, which states, “Vie in good deeds” (Q 5:48).¹²

This narrative, at its core, is a plea for a share of divine love and nearness, an acknowledgment of life's sanctity, an endorsement of pacifism, and a call for justice. Nevertheless, this interpretation warrants further refinement and substantiation in future endeavors.

12 This distinction also separates the Qur'ānic interpretation from the biblical version, where divine selection lacks clear rationale.

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“Signs for Those Who Can Decipher Them”

Ancient Ruins in the Qur’ān

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1 Introduction

The Qur’ān contains a substantial discourse focusing on ruins, part of a larger presentation of salvation history, including both the biblical past and the legends of pre-Islamic Arabia. The Qur’ānic portrayal of ruins focuses on prophetic missions to ancient nations and their destruction by acts of God’s punishment. It also stresses mankind’s edification through the historical and archaeological traces that ancient civilizations have left behind. Ruins provide concrete evidence of the history of communication between God and mankind through prophecy; they are meant to be examined with the goal of understanding that process. According to the Qur’ānic text, mankind has an ethical obligation to study ancient civilizations and ancient ruins in order to understand both the nature of mankind and the regular patterns of God’s workings in the world.

What is mankind supposed to learn, ultimately? Is the ethical paradigm of the Qur’ān a consequentialist morality—dictating that one must listen to prophets only in order to avoid ending up like the punished nations of the past? Or is it a utilitarian morality—dictating that following correct behavior will allow contemporary civilizations to flourish? Both are implied. The function of the punishment stories and of the ruins of past civilizations as a warning is clear in the Qur’ān and emphasized time and time again. They prove the power of God over nations in the world, and they prove the reality of prophecy as a legitimate means of communication between God and mankind. However, the stories present in addition a Qur’ānic theory of the rise and fall of civilizations, in which civilizations come to an end through the arrogance and ingratitude of their people. Avoidance of arrogance, recognition of God’s power and benevolence, and gratitude for His gifts and blessings would enable a civilization to avoid meeting this downfall. One might then ask whether the knowledge gained in this process is simply instrumental. Certainly, it is portrayed as a means to an end, but it is crucial for one’s faith, just as obedience to

God and regular acts of devotion are crucial for one's salvation. The by-product of these processes of observation, the knowledge and skills gained, must be important, and it is unlikely, after one has arrived through them at the resulting understanding of God's control over the world, that they would lose their significance. Ruins elicit a rational response and in so doing exalt the use of reason as an ethical goal.

2 Ruins and the Episodes of Salvation History

Many Qur'ānic accounts of earlier prophets and their peoples refer to specific ruins or relics. After a survey of the main ruins or relics invoked in the Qur'ān, attention will turn to the historical framework into which the descriptions of ruins fit. An analysis is presented of the Qur'ānic view of history, as well as the typological arguments the Qur'ān puts forward, drawing analogies from episodes in salvation history to the experiences of the Prophet Muḥammad and his audience. This study then focuses on the discourse of signs, showing that the Qur'ān presents ruins as an important class of historical signs, emphasizing the process of observation and decipherment that humans are instructed to undertake in order to interpret the tangible traces that have been left behind by ancient civilizations.

2.1 *Noah's Ark*

Though Islamic sources preserve the legend of Adam's falling to the Earth after being cast out of the Garden of Eden and creating a tremendous footprint where he landed in Ceylon (Abeydeera 1992), the first relic in the chronology of salvation history to be mentioned in the Qur'ān is Noah's Ark. According to the text, Noah's Ark landed on a mountain named al-Jūdī: "When the word went forth: 'O earth! swallow up thy water!' and 'O sky! withhold (thy rain)!' the water abated, and the matter was ended. The Ark rested on Mount al-Jūdī, and the word went forth: 'Away with those who do wrong!'" (Q 11:44). Mount al-Jūdī is probably meant to be a mountain in Arabia, matching other modifications of the Noah story that assimilate it to the Arabian environment, such as the attribution of the gods of the Arabian pagans—Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq, and Nasr—to Noah's people in Q 71:23. *Sūrat al-Qamar* (Q 54) specifies that the Ark has been left as a sign: "And We bore him on a craft of planks and nails. ... And We left it as a sign, but is there any who takes heed?" (Q 54:13, 15). Another passage that appears to refer to the Ark occurs in *sūrat al-Ḥāqqa*:

When the water inundated, We bore you on the ship
That We might make it a Reminder to you and that a conscious ear would
be aware of it.

Q 69:11–12

This passage curiously addresses both the passengers on the ship and the audience of the reminder as “you” in the second person plural. If this is indeed a reference to Noah’s Ark, the first “you” must mean “you humans on the Ark”—i.e., the forefathers of all humanity—and the second, “you, the contemporary audience.” The conflation stresses the immediate relevance of the past to the present. In any case, the term *tadhkira* “reminder” in this passage is parallel in meaning to *āya* in Q 54:13 and indicates that the relic of Noah’s Ark remains high on a mountain as a physical reminder to posterity of the all-engulfing flood and proof that it occurred.

2.2 *Iram and the Ruins of ‘Ād*

The people of ‘Ād built the temple or city of Iram (Q 89:6–7), the ruins of which featured impressive columns. In addition, reference to the ruined homes of ‘Ād appears in Q 46:25: “... In the morning there was nothing to see except their ruined dwellings: This is how We repay the guilty.” ‘Ād and Thamūd are often invoked together: “[Remember] the tribes of ‘Ād and Thamūd: their history is made clear to you by [what is left of] their [ruined] dwellings” (Q 29:38). A third set of structures attributed to ‘Ād are perched on the tops of hills or mountains. The prophet Hūd reprimands ‘Ād, “How can you be so vain that you set up a monument (*āya*) on every high place? Do you build fortresses (*maṣānīʿ*) because you hope to be immortal?” (Q 26:128–129). The pillars of Iram, dwellings, fortresses, and monuments on high places—either altars or mountaintop strongholds—stand as physical evidence of ‘Ād’s former glory.

2.3 *The Rock Dwellings of Thamūd*

The Qur’ān refers frequently to dwellings carved into the rock walls of the valleys inhabited by Thamūd. These have been identified with the site of Madā’in Ṣāliḥ in Arabia and are similar to the buildings carved into the valley walls of Petra, the Nabataean capital. “The people of the Rocky Tract (al-Ḥijr)” (Q 15:80) must be identical to Thamūd, precisely because they are described as having hewed their dwellings out of the rock.

The people of the Rocky Tract also rejected Our messengers:
We gave them Our signs, but they turned their backs,
carved out dwellings in the mountains, and lived in security—

the blast overwhelmed them early in the morning.
What they had gained was of no use to them.

Q 15:80–84

In another passage, the prophet Ṣāliḥ asks Thamūd, his people, whether they are convinced that their current prosperity will last:

[Do you think] you will be left secure forever in what you have here—
Gardens, springs,
Fields, palm trees laden with fruit—
Carving your fine houses from the mountains?

Q 26:146–149

Again, the description here focuses on dwellings carved out of the rock, but it significantly adds mention of gardens and agricultural land surrounding an oasis. Reference to their empty dwellings occurs in the following synopsis of their historical destruction in retaliation for plotting against the prophet Ṣāliḥ:

See how their scheming ended: We destroyed them utterly, along with all
their people.

As a result of their evil deeds, their homes are desolate ruins. There truly
is a sign in this for those who know,

But We saved those who believed and were mindful of God.

Q 27:51–53

Thamūd were destroyed, but their dwellings remain as tangible evidence of their punishment. Q 7:74 stresses Thamūd's role as successors to the powerful nation of 'Ād: "Remember how He made you heirs after 'Ād and established you in the land to build yourselves castles on its plains and carve houses out of the mountains," adding castles to the ruins attributed to Thamūd. Overall, the most salient ruins of Thamūd are the buildings they carved into the rock walls of their valley, the remains of which are explicitly presented as signs for posterity in Q 27:52.

2.4 Sodom and Gomorrah

The "Overturned Cities" (*al-mu'tafikāt*) inhabited by Lot's people are frequently cited among the observable ruins that serve as a warning to contemporaries of God's punishment of past nations. *Sūrat al-'Ankabūt* (Q 29) includes a three-verse punishment story of the people of Lot:

When Our messengers came to Lot, he was troubled and distressed on their account. They said, "Have no fear or grief: we shall certainly save you and your household, except your wife—she will be one of those who stay behind.

Indeed, we shall send a punishment from heaven down on the people of this city because they were sinners."

We have left of it a clear sign for a people who comprehend.

Q 29:33–35

Here the angels reassure Lot that they will save him and his family, with the exception of his wife, when they destroy his town. God then announces, "We left some of it as a clear sign" (*taraknā minhā āyatan bayyina*), the pronoun *-hā* "it" referring back to the *qarya* "city," for future generations to reflect upon. Another reference to the town's function as a sign occurs in *sūrat al-Ḥijr* (Q 15):

We turned their city upside down and rained on them a shower of clay stones.

There are truly signs in this for those who can decipher them—

It is still there on the highway—

There truly is a sign in this for those who believe.

Q 15:74–77

Here, the terms "sign" *āya* and "signs" *āyāt* occur in close proximity in reference to the remains of Lot's city (Q 15:75, 77). In the first instance, the signs are intended for *al-mutawassimīn* (Q 15:75). This last term derives from *wasm* "mark, stamp, or brand" and means here those who intend to or are able to scrutinize marks or decipher traces. The passage also states, *innahā la-bi-sabīlin muqīm* "it," presumably the town, "is on an established (?) road" (Q 15:76), a phrase which Abdel Haleem renders as "there on the highway" (Abdel Haleem 2004, 164).¹ A third passage referring to the ruins of Lot's town occurs in *sūrat al-Ṣāffāt* (Q 37):

Lot was also one of the messengers.

We saved him and all his household

—except for an old woman who stayed behind—

¹ The construction of this verse raises some questions, such as what the exact meaning of *muqīm* would be—perhaps "abiding" in this context, when it normally means "erecting," or "residing." The context suggests emphasis on the visibility of the ruins themselves, and not on the visibility of the road on which it lies. Indeed, Abdel Haleem's translation goes along with this idea.

And We destroyed the others.
 Indeed, you people pass over them morning
 And night: will you not use your reason?
 Q 37:133–38

This passage refers explicitly to members of the contemporary audience passing by the site of annihilation, asking whether they will learn a lesson from this: *a-fa-lā ta'qilūn* “Will you not comprehend?” (Q 37:138). Unusually, the text does not refer to the town per se but rather to the people who have been destroyed, using the masculine plural pronoun: “Indeed you (pl.) pass over *them* morning / and at night” (Q 37:137–138). The fact that members of the audience are described as passing by them suggests that the location of the ruins is well-known and relatively close by. Another passage makes the explicit point that the town of Lot is not distant from the audience:

And so, when what We had ordained came to pass, We turned their city
 upside down and rained down stones of baked clay upon it, layer upon
 layer,
 Marked from your Lord. *It is not far from the evildoers.*
 Q 11:82–83

The evildoers here evidently refer to the contemporary audience of the Prophet Muḥammad. These four passages show that the ruins of Lot's town constitute one of the more prominent examples of ruins in the Qur'ān. They are cited frequently as an instructive example for the contemporary audience.

Another passage may be added to those that present the story of Lot's town, despite the fact that it does not contain an explicit reference. In *sūrat al-Furqān*, one verse refers to an unnamed ruined town: “They [the disbelievers] have come across the town whereon was rained the terrible rain. Can it be that they have not seen it? ...” (Q 25:40). Although neither Lot nor God's messengers to his people are mentioned here, the reference to rain allows the reader to connect this town with that of Lot, since five other verses refer to rain as the instrument of destruction of Lot's people (Q 7:84, 11:82–83, 15:74, 26:172–173, 27:58). Here, too, the implication is that the town in question is Sodom.

2.5 Midian

Midian is the people of the prophet Shu'ayb, who has been associated with Reuel or Jethro, i.e., Moses' father-in-law, because of the chronology of salvation history and the connection to the region of Midian. Nevertheless, Shu'ayb is clearly a distinct, non-biblical figure who formed part of pre-Islamic Arabian

mythology. Shu'ayb's story occurs chronologically after that of Abraham and Lot, but before that of Moses and Pharaoh. The Qur'ān also refers to the people of Midian as Aṣḥāb al-Ayka "the People of the Thicket" or "the Inhabitants of Tanglewood" (Q 15:78, 26:176, 38:13, 50:14).² One passage refers to their remains as being plainly visible: "The People of the Thicket were wrongdoers, and We took retribution on them; both are still there on the highway, plain for all to see" (Q 15:78–79).³ This interpretation is perhaps strengthened by the fact that a dual pronoun is employed in the reference to the ruins of Midian: *wa-innahumā* "they both are," apparently indicating both Midian and Sodom, which had been mentioned just prior to these verses.

2.6 Pharaoh's Monuments

Several monuments are attributed to Pharaoh. First, Pharaoh is twice termed *dhū l-awṭād*, literally "possessor of the tent-pegs." This epithet, often understood by commentators to refer to his alleged use of stakes as implements of torture, probably refers instead to the fact that he was the builder of the pyramids, obelisks, or other monumental buildings. The wedge shape of the *watad* or tent peg allows it to be used in the Qur'ān as a descriptive term for a mountain (Q 78:7), so it makes sense that the *watad* could refer as well to pyramids, which resemble mountains in shape. Obelisks are also a possible referent, on the grounds that they resemble sharp, slender tent pegs in shape. It is reasonable to assume that the Prophet Muḥammad's contemporaries were aware, even at some distance, of Egypt's most famous monuments. A second type of building is attributed to Pharaoh when he orders his vizier, Hāmān, to build a palace or tower (*ṣarḥ*) that he might ascend to look upon the lord of Moses (Q 28:38). One may compare this to the Tower of Babel in the Book of Genesis, a symbol of mankind's—and in this case Pharaoh's—arrogance. These both may be related to ruins of colossal Ancient Egyptian edifices that were standing in Egypt during the Prophet's era.

There is a pointed reference to a third type of Pharaonic relic, distinct from the pyramids and the tower just mentioned, and more difficult to define precisely. One of the several passages which describes the escape of the Children of Israel from the Egyptians by crossing the sea portrays Pharaoh as repenting upon the realization that he and his army will be drowned:

2 On Shu'ayb in general, see Speyer 1937–1939, 249–254; Beeston 1968, 253–255; Bosworth 1974; Bosworth 1984; Tottoli 2004, 4:605–606.

3 The phrase referring to the ruins, *wa-innahumā la-bi-imāmin mubīn* (Q 15:79) is somewhat unusual. Here the term *imām*—ordinarily "leader"—is used to denote a road. This interpretation suggests itself especially because it is evidently parallel to the term *sabīl* "way, path," which appears in a similar statement in Q 15:76.

We brought the Children of Israel across the sea. Pharaoh and his troops pursued them in arrogance and aggression. But when he was about to drown, he cried, “I believe that there is no god except the one the Children of Israel believe in. I submit to Him.”

“What? Now? When before you were always a rebel and a trouble-maker!”

Today we shall save you in your body, that you might be a sign to all posterity. A great many people fail to heed Our signs.

Q 10:90–92

The last-minute repentance of Pharaoh raises theological questions. At the very least, it seems clear that God is unwilling to accept his repentance fully on the grounds that he was unrelenting in his evil deeds up until the very last minute.⁴ Muslim theologians regularly cite this passage as proof that a last-minute repentance is insufficient. God does not actually save Pharaoh in the ordinary fashion, as when God saves the prophets and their believers in typical punishment stories (e.g., Q 26:119, 170). However, the repentance has some effect, for God saves Pharaoh “in your body” (*bi-badanika*). Eric Ormsby interprets this as an act of divine mockery or poetic justice of sorts: “This is a mock deliverance, a sort of bitter parody of genuine redemption.” He adds that ‘Alī al-Qārī’ al-Harawī (d. 1014/1605) observed, “fictitious deliverance is conformable with compelled belief” (*al-khalāṣ al-ṣūrī kāna fī muṭābaqat al-īmān al-iḍṭirārī*) (Ormsby 2004, 17). It is as if Pharaoh had repented in order to “save his skin,” and God complied with his request by literally saving his skin only, and nothing else.

The passage does not elaborate or explain exactly what Pharaoh’s being saved “in his body” means, shifting attention to the deliverance of the Children of Israel in the next verse instead (Q 10:93). However, the reference to Pharaoh’s body’s serving as a “sign” (*āya*) for posterity, literally “to those after you” (*li-man khalfaka*), suggests that the text joins the result of God’s act in this instance to the class of ruins and relics under discussion. According to Rudi Paret, the reference to Pharaoh’s body as a sign renders it parallel to Noah’s Ark, in that both are relics of destruction by flood. According to Rudi Paret, the text may allude either to a remarkable mountain or cliff formation on the coast of the Red Sea that resembles the figure of a pharaoh, or to the ancient Egyptian practice of mummification of pharaohs (Paret 1962; 1977; Busse 1979). The modern commentator Ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1973) suggests that Pharaoh’s body was miraculously cast ashore, unlike the bodies of the rest of his army, which were consumed by

4 On this question, see Ormsby 2004; Sinai 2019.

fish after they had drowned (Ibn ʿĀshūr 1984, 11:278–279). I suggest a third alternative, that Pharaoh's preserved body is envisaged here as a life-like statue. In any case, Pharaoh's body is clearly preserved in some recognizable physical form as a relic, either a statue or a mummy, to be observed by later generations. One thinks of the colossal statues at Abu Simbel, for example. Such a statue serves to remind them of God's use of his power to end Pharaoh's oppression of the Children of Israel.

2.7 *The Ruins of Sheba*

The ruins of the nation of Sheba represent another prominent example of ruins in the Qurʾān. *Sūrat Sabaʾ* (Q 34) recounts the destruction of the ancient nation of Sheba by a great flood. The Qurʾānic text refers to the end of the nation of Sheba as a byword (Q 34:19), presumably alluding to the Arabic proverbial expression *dhahabū aydī Sabaʾ* or *dhahabū ayādī Sabaʾ* “They went as did the hands of Sheba,” or *tafarraqū aydī Sabaʾ* “They dispersed as did the hands of Sheba,” meaning that they dispersed in all directions, never to be reunited (Lane 1863, 1287). This has been associated with the destruction of the Maʾrib Dam, a historical event—or a series of similar events—that was known to the Arabs through historical lore and legend (Q 34:15–19).⁵ Apparently, the Qurʾān does not associate a particular prophet with Sheba. Therefore, the cause of their annihilation is not the rejection of prophecy. Rather, the nation of Sheba was destroyed on account of their failure to thank God for their blessings.

3 The Qurʾānic Discourse of Signs

One striking feature of the Qurʾān is its discourse of signs (*āyāt*), a term of central importance in the text (Graham 2014). Signs in the Qurʾān are visible, observable phenomena that point to truths that are not directly visible. They fall into several classes, including the following three at the very least. First, natural wonders such as large mountains, the expansive sky, the growth of large plants from tiny seeds, and so on indicate that divine beings must exist, because humans are incapable of creating such things. Secondly, orderly processes in the universe, such as the regular alternation of night and day, the regular procession of the seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, the phases of the moon, the regular motions of the stars and planets, and other similar cycles and patterns of motion indicate that there must be one, singular God. The existence of a multiplicity of gods, each in control of his or her own limited

⁵ For the current state of research on the Maʾrib dam, see Darles et al. 2013.

bailiwick, would have resulted in a lack of coordinated motion and produced a chaotic, unsynchronized world. Thirdly, ruins of past civilizations indicate that God has communicated regularly with human nations by sending prophets to them. The ruins attest to the fact that past nations have been annihilated for their arrogance and ingratitude to God for the favors they received and especially for rejecting the messages of their prophets, messengers on God's behalf.

The discourse of signs embodies a crucial focus on the individual human, with both didactic and ethical implications. Signs potentially convey a message, but that message is not simply received in a passive manner by creation. It must be understood through human reason. In order to derive the message, humans must resort to observation and rational inquiry. The obligation to do so is general, and not just applicable to believers, since it is ontologically prior to belief—belief is the result of the process. This obligation is stressed in a number of Qur'ānic verses and repeated phrases, in which suggestions that humans must think, reflect, or consider follow the mention of signs closely:

Thus God brings the dead to life and shows you His signs—so that you (*la'allakum*) may comprehend.

Q 2:73, cf. 2:219, 221, 242, 266

This represents only one example among many phrases of this type. Scores of similar phrases occur throughout the Qur'ān, stressing the crucial connection of God's signs with human reflection and comprehension. God presents his signs clearly to the audience so that they might be able to understand them.

References to signs are often followed by a phrase beginning with the particle *la'alla*, which occurs 129 times in the Qur'ān. It sometimes occurs with the conjunction *wa-* “and” as *wa-la'alla* (Q 2:150, 185, 7:63, 164, 174, 16:14, 44, 28:73, 30:46, 35:12, 40:67, 45:12). The particle occurs with a following noun three times: once followed by *Allāh* “God” and twice followed by *al-sā'a* “the Hour,” referring to the Day of Resurrection. It occurs several times with the first-person singular suffix, as *la'allī* (Q 12:46, 20:10, 23:100, 28:29, 38, 40:36), with the second-person singular suffix, as *la'allaka* (11:21, 18:6, 20:130, 26:3), with the third-person singular suffix, as *la'allahu* (Q 20:40, 21:111, 80:3), and once with the first-person plural suffix, as *la'allanā* (Q 26:40). It is most often followed by an imperfect verb in the second- or third-person masculine plural. The phrase occurs at the ends of verses and thus provides an end-rhyme in *-ūn*, as occurs in the examples cited above.

The particle *la'alla* is usually understood to mean “perhaps” and is described as a *ḥarf tarajjin* “a particle expressing hope” with regard to desired things and a *ḥarf tawaqqu'* “a particle expressing cautious expectation” with regard to

things one desires to fend off. It is held to refer only to things that are possible, and so does not express unreal conditions, which are most often introduced by the particle *law* “if, if only.” Many early Arab grammarians considered this the only meaning of *la’alla*. However, a minority of experts, including al-Kisā’ī (d. 197/812), al-Quṭrub (d. 206/821–822), al-Farrā’ (d. 207/822), al-Akhfash (d. 215/830), Ibn Kaysān (d. 320/932), and Abū ‘Alī al-Fārisī (d. 377/987), hold that *la’alla* can be used for the purposes of *istifhām* “posing a question” or *ta’līl* “stating a purpose.” In other words, *la’alla* can also mean *hal* “whether” or *kay* “so that” or “in order that” (Ibn Hishām 1991, 1:317–322; al-Zahrānī 2000, 439–441). In my assessment, the term *la’alla* in most of these Qur’ānic phrases is equivalent in meaning to *kay* “so that” or “in order that.”

In most cases, these phrases introduced by *la’alla* express an ethical obligation. They were ignored by the jurists who went through the text of the Qur’ān in search of phrases that could be construed as commands and prohibitions, on the grounds that those were the phrases that created legal obligations. In their view, the particle *la’alla* does not convey such a command. Qur’ānic phrases with *la’alla* on occasion indicate a possible occurrence in the future, as in the statement *la’alla al-sā’ata takūnu qarīban* “Perhaps the Hour will come soon” (Q 33:63, 42:17), or *la’alla Llāha yuḥdithu ba’dā dhālika amran* “Perhaps God will bring forth anew a matter after that” (Q 65:1). In the phrases of the type examined here, however, *la’alla* introduces what one may construe as God’s intended purpose. For example, the verse *innā anzalnāhu Qur’ānan ‘arabiyyan la’allakum ta’qilūn* (Q 12:2) means “We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’ān in order for you to understand [it].” This example is representative of the main function of *la’alla* in the Qur’ānic text.

In verse 12:2 and other similar verses, these *la’alla* phrases express a desired goal of God, reporting the purpose for which He has done something. In some cases, the result is expressed in verbs indicating the hope of achieving correct religious behavior or belief: *tattaqūn* “that you may fear God,” *tashkurūn* “that you may give thanks,” *tufliḥūn* “that you may succeed,” i.e., “be saved,” *turḥamūn* “that you may be shown mercy,” *tahtadūn* “that you may be guided aright.” Other verbs, however, refer to the rational capacity of the human audience: *yafqahūn* “that they may understand” (Q 6:65); *ta’qilūn* “that you may comprehend” (Q 2:73, 242, 6:151, 12:2, 24:61, 40:67, 43:3, 57:17); *tatafakkarūn* “that you may reflect” (Q 2:219); *yatafakkarūn* “that they may reflect” (Q 7:176, 16:44, 59:21); *tadhakkarūn* “that you may take heed” (Q 6:152, 7:57, 16:90, 24:1, 27, 51:49); *yadhakkarūn* (Q 2:221, 14:25, 28:43, 46, 51, 39:27, 44:58) or *yadhakkarūn* “that they may take heed” (Q 7:26, 130, 8:57). These verses urge the audience to reflect, contemplate, and attempt to understand. Humans therefore have a general obligation to investigate and reflect upon the signs that have been presented to them.

Another set of phrases that serve a similar function to those which mention signs uses the term *ibra* “admonishment, lesson” or the cognate verb *i’tabara*, *ya’tabiru* “to take to heart, be admonished”:

In that there is a lesson (*la-ibratan*) for those endowed with sight.

Q 3:13, 24:44, cf. 59:20

So take the lesson to heart (*fa-‘tabirū*), those of you who are endowed with sight.

Q 59:20

In the place of verbs that describe the process of grasping and comprehending, these verses refer instead to eyes, which represent here the sensory organs and the human capacity for perception and interpretation. All of these verses suggest that it is incumbent upon humans not simply to observe the signs or to notice them in a passive manner. Rather, they must examine the signs, consider them, and reflect upon them. This active engagement is necessary for them to derive and understand the signs’ correct implications, and it is a general obligation for all mankind.

4 Salvation History and the Prophetic Pattern in the Qur’ān

“The Qur’ān has usually been denied any serious interest in history,” Angelica Neuwirth has lamented (Neuwirth 2003, 14). Attention to the Qur’ānic text itself shows that it indeed has a tremendous investment in history, and its view thereof—or, to put it more precisely, one of the dominant views of history in the text—provides essential background to the presentation of ruins therein. The Qur’ān recognizes historical patterns, but they are not endless cycles of eons, as one finds in the Hindu tradition, for the history of the world is finite on both ends. Even if one day might be 50,000 years, as one verse reports (Q 70:4), the earth was created and Adam was formed as the first human at a particular point in the past, and even though no one, not even the Prophet Muḥammad, knows when the Hour will come, it will certainly occur at a particular point in time in the future. Indeed, many passages in the Qur’ān suggest that the Resurrection and the Day of Judgment are imminent. In addition, salvation history unfolds in historical time. Humanity is Adam’s progeny, and the descendants of Abraham and Amram both include a historical succession of prophets. It has been argued that the Qur’ān “squeezes” time, so that the time between creation or the present and the end of time is portrayed as short, thus increasing the urgency of adopting the correct religion. While this is an

authentic and indeed central Qur'ānic view of time that may be detected especially in apocalyptic passages, the main view of Qur'ānic time with regard to narratives of figures from salvation history is that of the chronological progression of biblical history. Wadad Kadi argues that time in the Qur'ān is divided into three periods, primordial time, when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden and when God made the primordial covenant with mankind, the middle period, which is what we are concerned with here, and apocalyptic time, when the Day of Resurrection and the Reckoning occur.⁶

The main mode of the presentation of time in the Qur'ān during this middle period, that of "ordinary" history, is relative. Thus, Adam came before Noah, Noah before Hūd, Hūd before Šāliḥ, and Šāliḥ before Abraham. Whereas the Bible often provides specific names, ages or years lapsed, and toponyms, the Qur'ān rarely provides an exact number of years that someone lived, the exact number of sons a man fathered, along with their names and their descendants' names, or detailed lists of toponyms. The main exception to this distinctive style is the presentation of Noah, who is reported to have lived among his people for 950 years (Q 29:14). The Qur'ān nevertheless conveys a strong sense of relative chronology. Thus, the common idea that the succession of prophecies as presented in the Qur'ān is cyclical and represents a flattening of time is decidedly not the case (Neuwirth 2003, 14).

When several narratives from salvation history occur together in a *sūra*, they are usually presented in chronological order in accordance with biblical history. Non-biblical peoples mentioned, especially 'Ād, Thamūd, and Midian, are fit into particular chronological slots in biblical history: the eras of 'Ād and Thamūd were between those of Noah and Abraham, and the era of Midian was between those of Lot and Moses. So, for example, *sūrat* Hūd (Q 11) features Noah, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Abraham and Lot, Shu'ayb, and Moses, in that order, and *sūrat* al-Qamar (Q 54) features the people of Noah, 'Ād, Thamūd, the people of Lot, and Pharaoh, in that order. Such sequences evident in Qur'ānic *sūras* generally follow the presentation of biblical history.

In addition, explicit references to chronological order also occur. *Sūrat* al-A'rāf presents the stories of the people of Noah, 'Ād, Thamūd, the people of Lot, Shu'ayb, and Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh. In the section that relates the story of 'Ād, their prophet, Hūd, addresses them: "And remember when [God] made you successors after the people of Noah ..." (Q 7:69). Similarly, the prophet Šāliḥ addresses his people Thamūd, "And remember when [God] made you successors after 'Ād ..." (Q 7:74). The story of Moses is introduced later in the same *sūra* as follows: "Then We sent, after them, Moses with our signs to

6 On Qur'ānic views of time, see Newby 2003; Kadi 2003; Neuwirth 2003; Rosenthal 2002; Neuwirth 2010, 223–234.

Pharaoh and his council ..." (Q 7:109). In this context, "after *them*" means after Noah, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Lot, and Shu'ayb, the prophets whose stories have been presented earlier in the *sūra*. One section of *sūrat Yūnus* tells the story of Noah, then refers to unnamed messengers of God, and mentions Moses and Aaron's being sent to Pharaoh and his council. The verse immediately following the presentation of Noah's story in Q 10:71–73 reads, "Then, *after him*, We sent messengers to their peoples ..." (Q 10:74). The next verse reads, "Then, *after them*, We sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh and his council" (Q 10:75). The context dictates that both verses are referring to the prophets whom God sent to mankind in the intervening period after the time of Noah and before the time of Moses. The statement "Like the custom of the people of Noah, 'Ād, Thamūd, and those who came after them ..." (Q 40:31) shows an awareness that the people of Noah, 'Ād, and Thamūd belong to ancient nations, and that many other peoples received prophetic missions in later historical periods. These and other explicit references to relative chronology demonstrate that the apparent arrangement of narratives from salvation history in chronological order that one sees within many individual *sūras* is no accident. The Qur'ān has a strong sense of history.

Some *sūras* are exceptions, and their internal arrangement does not follow chronological order. *Sūrat al-Naml* (Q 27) begins with Moses and then presents a lengthy section on Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, but this is followed by a version of the story of Šāliḥ and Thamūd, and then the story of Lot and his people. According to the chronology of salvation history, Šāliḥ and Lot should have preceded both Moses and Solomon. *Sūrat Maryam* (Q 19) begins with the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus, but then presents narratives of Abraham, Moses, Ishmael, and Idrīs. According to biblical history, Ishmael should have preceded Moses, and Abraham, Ishmael, and Moses all should have preceded John the Baptist and Jesus. These are not the only violations of the chronology of salvation history in the *sūras* of the Qur'ān, but overall, the *sūras* that present prophets and peoples of the past in the expected chronological order far outnumber those that do not.

Prophets on the whole resemble each other, and their missions follow a similar, predictable pattern, even if they differ in detail. The Qur'ān reports, "We certainly raised up a messenger in every nation" (Q 16:36), and 14:4 insists that nations are sent prophets who speak their own tongue. Several passages state that one must believe in all the prophets, the entire series, and that all have been sent and blessed by God. They are all equivalent in a basic sense, even though some have been favored with particular gifts (Q 2:136, 285, 3:84, 4:152). For example, God spoke directly to Moses (Q 4:164); He gave wisdom to Solomon, as well as the ability to understand the speech of animals and birds (Q 27:15–44); He gave David the Psalms (Q 4:163, 17:55) and the ability

to make armor or chain mail (Q 34:10); and He permitted Jesus to perform a large number of miracles (Q 5:110). Nevertheless, each prophet is chosen by God and commissioned to deliver God's message to his own people. This message is generally similar: worship the one, true God, believe in the Day of Judgment, pray, and do good works. The prophet's preaching is usually rejected by the vast majority of his people. A few of them, however, accept the message and become believers. The prophet continues to preach to his people, warning them that they will meet with a dire fate if they do not believe. They continue to reject belief and do not heed the messages of the prophet, and then God annihilates the disbelievers while saving the prophet and the small group of believers. Qur'anic scholarship has recognized this pattern as forming a major part of a prominent genre in the Qur'an which has been termed *Straflegenden* ("punishment legends") or punishment stories (Sprenger 1869, 1:469–504; Horovitz 1926, 10–32; Bell 1953, 119–28; Wansbrough 1977, 2–5, 19–21; Zwettler 1990, 75–119, 205–231; Marshall 1999; Welch 2000; Stewart 2000; Neuwirth 2010, 617–30). This repeated pattern forms the backbone of salvation history in the Qur'an.

5 Prophetic Typology and Destroyed Civilizations

The history of prophets in the Qur'an is presented within a typological framework of interpretation. The examples of the past salvation history are not just of antiquarian interest but have immediate relevance to the contemporary situation of the Prophet Muḥammad and his immediate audience. The various situations earlier prophets faced in the past are seen to mirror, prefigure, and provide insight into the situations faced by the Prophet Muḥammad and his community. The regular pattern of prophetic missions in history makes it possible to predict the contours of the Prophet Muḥammad's mission, or, to put it somewhat differently, the events of the Prophet's mission are seen to fulfill predictions embodied in those earlier examples from salvation history. A clear instance of this type of analogical reasoning is seen in *sūrat al-Taḥrīm* (Q 66), which blames wives of the Prophet for divulging confidence and for committing some other unnamed infraction. Examples of commendable women are presented: Mary the mother of Jesus and the wife of Pharaoh. Examples of blameworthy women are presented: the wife of Noah and the wife of Lot. The point is not just historical, for an analogical argument is being made about the present. Just as Muḥammad is parallel to messengers of the past, so too are his wives parallel to the wives of past messengers. If his wives persist in their bad behavior, they will meet the fate met by the wives of Noah

and Lot. No immunity is granted to wives of prophets on account of their close ties to God's chosen messengers: they will not escape punishment just because they are married to revered and spiritually outstanding figures. This type of analogical, typological argument is made in dozens of Qur'ānic *sūras* but is often not stated directly. In some passages, an analogical argument is made explicit through specific hints and comparative statements, but in others, it remains implicit. This typological framework remains in the background of all Qur'ānic passages that present narratives of prophets of the past.⁷

Ancient ruins, relics, and remains constitute an important facet of the general prophetic pattern seen in the punishment stories. The situations in which they appear are reminiscent of, but in certain respects distinct from, the common motif *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt* "Where are those who were before us?" In Arabic literature, a site strongly associated with the *ubi sunt* motif is al-Madā'in (literally, "the Ruins") that is, the site of the former Sassanian capital in Iraq, twenty miles southeast of Baghdad. Many Arabic poems refer to the site's most striking monument, Īwān Kisrā "the Arched Hall of Chosroes," among other buildings. The most famous poem on Īwān Kisrā is that of the poet al-Buḥturī (d. 284/897). It includes the following description:

As if the Great Hall, from its wondrous construction, were hollowed from the cliff of a mountainside.

It would appear, from its sadness—to the eyes of a morning or evening visitor—

To be distraught at the loss of the company of a dear friend or distressed at the dispersal of a wedding celebration.

The nights have reversed its fortune, and Jupiter, that planet of misfortune, now reigns there ...⁸

The ruined palace creates a melancholy scene, but the poet is still inspired by its remaining grandeur, imagining the scene before the walls filled with generals, troops, and sweltering foreign embassies kept waiting by the proud king. Though the poem is triumphal in another section, celebrating the conquest of the Arabs over the Persians in the first/seventh century, the main message is that glory does not last.

7 Scholars have recently emphasized typology as a crucial rhetorical strategy of the Qur'ān (see Zwettler 1990; Stewart 2000; Lawson 2008; Neuwirth 2010; Griffith 2013, 64–71; Stewart forthcoming).

8 The translation is based on that of Samer M. Ali, with modifications. On the poem in general, see Ali 2006, 46–67, translation 62–64.

The Qur'ān's deployment of the *ubi sunt* motif is somewhat different from what one sees in the poem on the Hall of Chosroes. Impressive ancient ruins alert the contemporary audience to the tremendous power, ingenuity, or sophistication of earlier civilizations. There is an acute irony in the fact that these monuments, despite evidence of their excellent construction, are now desolate and lie in ruins. The contrast forces the audience to consider the scene, and to ask why, if this earlier nation was at one point so powerful, it has completely disappeared. Where have its people gone? This resembles the common *ubi sunt* motif but then diverges from it. As seen above, the *ubi sunt* trope usually answers this question by pointing out that accomplishments are ephemeral, that all things must pass, and that no one is immortal. The Qur'ān's portrayal draws a negative conclusion about the people whom fate has obliterated, including the attribution of pride or arrogance to them, but it suggests additionally that one ought to draw a conclusion having to do with the history of prophecy. Indeed, arriving at this conclusion may be viewed as the main purpose behind this entire class of signs.

Ruins provoke an argument about prophecy that, though generally implicit and incomplete in the text, runs as follows. The past nation was powerful and culturally advanced, as is evident from their monumental and technically impressive ruins. This would make it unlikely for a neighboring nation to have toppled it. Nor is there a suggestion in the Qur'ān of a standard biological analogy: that nations naturally are born, flourish, and then wane and eventually die. Nor does the Qur'ān provide any evidence of a theory like that of Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), according to which there is a cyclical progression of civilizations, in which barbaric tribes come in from the periphery and conquer the last tribal group to take over, who have grown weak because of their having become settled, grown accustomed to amenities, and lost their fierceness and strong group solidarity (Ibn Khaldūn 1967, 271–274). Since the nation in question was powerful, it stands to reason according to Qur'ānic logic that the only power that could have defeated it and wiped it from the face of the earth—for the ruined sites are completely abandoned—is God. God must have had cause to destroy them, and the assumed reason is that they rejected their prophet, God's messenger to them. A second, though somewhat less frequently implied reason is that they grew arrogant and did not show gratitude for the blessings God had bestowed on them. The people of Sheba in particular were ungrateful for God's gifts and destroyed on that account (Q 34:15). Other passages make it clear that certain peoples, including the people of Noah, 'Ād, Thamūd, and the ruler Pharaoh, were particularly arrogant and ungrateful for the power and wealth God had bestowed on them, and that it was this arrogance and lack of gratitude, at least in part, that caused their downfall (Q 7:75, 88, 133, 10:75, 23:46, 29:39, 41:15, 71:7).

These are the main lessons that “the moderns” are supposed to deduce from ancient ruins. Rejection of prophets and ingratitude toward God caused the destruction of ancient nations, and the same would occur, analogically, to the unbelievers of the Prophet Muḥammad’s age, the pagans of the Quraysh tribe, for their rejection of him and their lack of gratitude for God’s favors to them. The implication was clear for the Prophet Muḥammad’s audience: accept his preaching and heed the warnings he conveyed or else face a terrible punishment.

Punishment stories in the Qur’ān are thus intimately related to the didactic role of historical knowledge. Scholars to date have connected the punishment stories with other literary genres that form part of revered Arab lore. Joseph Horowitz and John Wansbrough related the punishment stories to the *ubi sunt* motif and suggested a parallelism between them, as “the battles of God” *ayyām Allāh*, and the profane tradition of *ayyām al-Arab* “the tribal battles of the Arabs” (Horowitz 1926, 16, 22, 29; Wansbrough 1977, 2–5, 19–21), one of the main repositories of the Arabs’ historical knowledge, which serve as a store of exempla regarding military, diplomatic, and chivalric behavior. Angelika Neuwirth and Ghassan El Masri have noted the parallels between the Qur’ānic motif of ruined nations of the past and that of the *aṭlāl* or traces of the deserted campsite in Arabic poetry (Neuwirth 2010, 223–230; El Masri 2017, esp. 110–113). The *nasīb* or “amatory prelude” in which this scene occurs is historical in a more personal sense of nostalgia, but its logic is also based on the parallel act of reading the physical relics of the beloved in the landscape as clues in order to draw conclusions about the past. The Qur’ānic view of past nations accords generally with the widespread notion that the experiences of past nations provide analogical examples for the moderns, a view amply attested in the Islamic historical tradition and summed up neatly by Abū ‘Alī Aḥmad Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) in the introduction to his chronicle *Tajārib al-Umam* (“The Experiences of Nations”) (Miskawayh 2000, 1:47–48). The difference is that the Qur’ānic emphasizes the rejection of prophecy as the main cause of the nations’ downfall.

6 Signs and the Use of Reason

Ruins represent an important category of signs in the Qur’ān, and an understanding of their invocation in the text requires an understanding of the Qur’ānic discourse of signs. Qur’ānic epistemology could be viewed as frightfully simple: all knowledge derives from one source—God. Even though this might be a true characterization in one sense, the matter is not actually so simple, for knowledge must be conveyed from God to mankind in some non-trivial

manner. Since God communicates His knowledge in several ways, it may be sought through several intermediate sources. First are sacred texts, the scriptures that God has revealed to mankind. Second are the proclamations of prophets, who also convey God's messages and instructions to mankind. Third is the evidence of the natural world, including the wonders of the earth and the universe. The reception of the information from all three of these sources depends on human reason, which remains a crucial part of the process of communication, for in all cases, humans must receive and decode or interpret the messages that God has sent.

The evidence of the natural world is connected directly with the capacity of human reasoning in many explicit statements in the Qur'ānic discourse of signs. Particularly striking are passages that include the phrase *āyāt li-* ... "signs for ..." and then mention people who are depicted as using their minds.

We have set forth the signs in detail for a people who understand.

Q 6:98, cf. 2:164, 13:4, 15:77, 30:24, 45:5

Such verses use the verbs *yafqahu* "understand" and *ya'qilu* "comprehend" to refer to the process in which the audience is urged to engage. Verses of another set do not describe directly the audience for whom these signs are intended, but resemble the verses just cited quite closely, using the same verbs in verse-final position, but with a *la'alla* phrase instead.

Thus God makes the signs clear to you, so that you comprehend.

Q 24:61, cf. 57:17, 6:65

Yet another set of verses refers to the process of consideration or reflection, using the verbs *yatafakkaru* "reflect" or *yadhdhakkaru* [= *yatadhakkaru*] "take heed" and adopting a similar structure.

In that there are indeed signs for a people who reflect.

Q 13:3, 15:77, 16:11, 30:21, 39:42, 45:13, cf. 2:219, 266, 10:24, 30:28

We have set forth the signs in detail for a people who take heed.

Q 6:126, cf. 7:26, 16:13

These verses focus on the act of reflecting or considering rather than on the achievement of comprehension as a *fait accompli*. They refer to the audience's obligation to observe the signs carefully and to consider their implications. Understanding is a result at which they may arrive only after the expenditure of mental effort.

Yet other verses that adopt the structure outlined above use in parallel position the verb *yasmaʿūn* “hear” instead.

In that there are indeed signs for a people who hear.

Q 10:67, 30:23, cf. 16:65, 32:26

These instances of the verb *yasmaʿūn* are intended to invoke the idea of perception and comprehension, but they nevertheless raise questions. One usually assumes that the signs are visible, not audible. The fundamental distinction between *al-ghayb* “the Unseen” (literally, “the absent”) vs. *al-mashhūd* “the Seen” (literally, “the witnessed”) is most often understood to depend on vision. Here, however, the signs are intended to be heard, and this is presented as the primary mode of their reception. How can one hear a sign? Do these verses refer to hearing accounts of signs that have been seen by travelers? Or hearing accounts of past events that have been passed down for generations? Or hearing passages from sacred scriptures that tell of the events of salvation history? What is the relationship between hearing and seeing? Are they entirely parallel? Are they interchangeable?

A number of verses make similar statements using the singular *āya* “sign” instead of the plural *āyāt* “signs.” An entire parallel series of such phrases occurs in *sūrat al-Naḥl* (Q 16).

In that there is a sign for a people who reflect.

Q 16:11, cf. 16:13, 65, 67, 69

These verses all refer to a particular people or tribe and use the same verbs that have been remarked on above: *yaʿqilūn*, *yatafakkarūn*, *yadhdhakkarūn*, and *yasmaʿūn*. *Sūrat al-Qamar* (Q 54) includes the following verse, which also uses the singular *āya* and refers to the reflection in which the audience is supposed to engage, but features the form *muddakir*, the active participle of the form VIII verb, rather than the form V imperfect verb *yadhdhakkaru* that occurs in other contexts: *wa-laqaḍ taraknāhā āyatan fa-hal min muddakir* “We left it as a sign, but will anyone take heed?” (Q 54:15). Here God refers to leaving Noah’s Ark as a sign for later generations and the reflection that sight of the Ark is supposed to inspire. (The form *muddakir* appears here on account of the syllabic pattern required by the end-rhyme in *sūrat al-Qamar*, which the geminate *-kk-* would disturb.) Another verse similar in meaning is “We have left of it a clear sign for a people who comprehend” (Q 29:35).

Many passages in the Qurʾān point to the human potential for reasoning in conjunction with God’s signs in the world. In doing so, the Qurʾān generally refers to three categories of organs: eyes, ears, and hearts/minds. As in

the ancient world generally, the rational capacity was thought of, or at least expressed as, lying in the heart, so the heart in many contexts stands in for the mind. This is seen in, among other examples, the Arabic grammatical term *afʿāl al-qulūb* “verbs of hearts,” which refers to a set of verbs that mean to deem X Y, consider X Y, and so take two direct objects, as in *raʿaytuhu ḥimāran* “I thought him a donkey” or *aʿtabiruhu ṣadīqan* “I consider him a friend.” One might thus translate the term *afʿāl al-qulūb* as “mental verbs.” These three categories are often cited in conjunction, as in *al-samʿ wa-l-abṣār wa-l-afʿida* “ears, eyes, and hearts” (Q 16:78, 23:78, 32:9, 46:26, 67:23), indicating that they are understood to belong to the same general class of sensory organs. Key terms that refer to rational capacity include *baṣar* “sight, eye” (Q 17:36, 45:23); *abṣār* “eyes” (Q 3:13, 16:78, 108, 22:46, 23:78, 24:44, 32:9, 46:26, 59:2, 67:23), *aʿyun* “eyes” (Q 7:179, 195, 18:101, 36:66), *udhun* “ear” (Q 69:12), *ādhān* “ears” (Q 6:25, 7:179, 195, 17:46, 18:57, 22:46, 41:5, 44), *samʿ* “hearing, ears” (Q 2:7, 20, 6:46, 10:31, 11:20, 16:78, 108, 17:36, 23:78, 32:9, 41:20, 22, 45:23, 46:26, 67:23), *fuʿūd* “heart” (Q 17:36, 53:11), *afʿida* “hearts” (Q 6:110, 113, 16:78, 23:78, 32:9, 46:26, 67:23), *qulūb* “hearts” (Q 2:7, 6:25, 7:179, 9:87, 16:108, 17:46, 18:57, 22:46, 47:24), *albāb* “hearts/minds” (2:179, 197, 269, 3:7, 190, 5:100, 12:111, 12:119, 14:52, 38:29, 43, 39:9, 18, 21, 40:54, 65:10), *nuhā* “intellects” (Q 20:54, 128), and *aḥlām* “minds” (Q 52:32).⁹

In some cases, a distinction is drawn between merely sensing and understanding, so that eyes and ears differ from hearts and minds, but in many others, the two categories are conflated. So, for example, the terms *ulī l-nuhā* “those who have intellects” (Q 20:54, 128), and *ulū/ulī al-albāb* “those who have hearts/minds” (Q 2:179, 197, 269, 3:7, 190, 5:100, 12:111, 12:119, 14:52, 38:29, 43, 39:9, 18, 21, 40:54, 65:10) both refer to human rational capacity.

In the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day are indeed signs for those who have minds (*li-ulī l-albāb*).

Q 3:190

In that there are indeed signs for those endowed with intellects (*li-ulī n-nuhā*).

Q 30:128

One might expect the term *ulī l-abṣār* “those who are endowed with eyes, or sight” to be different, but it evidently serves the same purpose, and is used in

⁹ It is interesting to note that the noun *ʿaql*, *ʿuqūl* “mind, minds” does not appear in the Qurʾān, even though the verb *ʿaqala*, *yaʿqilu* does with some frequency. On many of these terms, see Seidensticker 1992.

entirely parallel fashion to the preceding two terms, referring to man's ability to understand and derive a lesson and not merely to his ability to see (Q 3:13, 24:44, 59:2). Hearts, eyes, and ears all appear in the following verse, which makes a distinction between hearts, by which humans understand, and eyes and ears, by which humans see and hear, even though they are all ultimately involved in the same combined process of perception and comprehension: "... They have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear. Those are like livestock; rather, they are even more astray. ..." (Q 7:179). The term "ear" is connected clearly with comprehension in the following verse: "that We render it a reminder for you, and that a conscious ear be conscious of it" (Q 69:12). The use of the verb *ta'īya* "be conscious" and the adjective *wā'īya* "conscious" shows that the ear is involved in comprehension and not simply auditory reception. In the following verse, however, both aspects of hearing appear:

Among them are those who listen to you, but We have placed over their hearts coverings, lest they understand it, and blockage in their ears. Even if they were to see every sign, they would not believe in it.

Q 6:25

Here the initial verb *yastami'u* "listen" refers to the mere act of auditory reception, but then the verse reports that God placed deafness in their ears. Rather than being a contradiction, the deafness in their ears refers to their inability to comprehend the message and to take it to heart. God places deafness in their ears in several other similar verses:

We have placed over their hearts coverings, lest they understand it, and in their ears deafness.

Q 17:46, cf. 18:57

Hearts and ears are parallel, something that is clear from the fact that God performs two parallel acts, placing covers over their hearts, on the one hand, and placing blockage in their ears, on the other. It follows that, on account of the phrase *an yafqahūhu* "lest they understand it" which follows *akinna* "coverings," there should be a parallel, elliptical phrase understood after *waqr* "blockage" or "deafness," referring to the lack of comprehension on the part of the people mentioned. A survey of the Qur'ān's references to sensory organs in general, and especially in connection with the signs discourse, shows that they are closely associated with perception and comprehension.

The signs discourse, which stresses humans' rational capacity, may be seen as supporting what later scholars of Islamic theology and ethics termed

wujūb al-naẓar “the obligation of rational inquiry.”¹⁰ Indeed, one may argue that the theologians chose the term *naẓar* for their characteristic type of ratiocination—as opposed to the jurists, who used *raʿy* early on, and *qiyās* and *ijtihād* in later centuries—specifically on account of the many commands using the verb *naẓara*, *yanẓuru* in the Qurʾānic discourse of signs. There, rational inquiry is portrayed as at least potentially effective. It is implied that obstinacy and willful neglect or ignorance, but not the inherent deficiencies of man’s capacity for reason, may prevent the audience from arriving at the proper conclusions from the signs. One might connect this with the Muʿtazilī view that rational inquiry unaided is capable of assessing the moral valence of particular acts, principles termed *taqbiḥ* ‘*aqlī* and *taḥsīn* ‘*aqlī* “the rational designation of something as evil” and “the rational designation of something as good,” which some scholars have related to the concept of natural law (Hourani 1971; Reinhart 1995, 43–56, 79–86; Vasalou 2008; Izzati 2002; Emon 2004–2005; 2010; Morrison 2013; Harb 2015, 133–164).

The signs discourse was analyzed in some detail in medieval Islamic works of several genres, including *tafsīr* or Qurʾānic commentary. One perceptive statement on the ethical and theological implications of the signs discourse appears in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī’s (d. 606/1209) explication of the following verse: “Say: Observe what is in the heavens and the earth. But signs and warnings avail not a people who do not believe” (Q 10:101). In his monumental Qurʾānic commentary *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* (“Keys to the Unseen”), al-Rāzī comments:

Know that this verse points to two results (*maṭlūbān*). The first is that there is no path to knowledge of God other than contemplation¹¹ of the evidentiary signs (*dalāʾil*), as the Prophet—peace be upon him—said: “Reflect on Creation, and do not reflect on the Creator.” The second is that the evidentiary signs are either from the world of the heavens or from the world of the earth. The celestial signs are the motions of the spheres, their measurements, and their positions, and [the celestial bodies] that they contain—the Sun, the Moon, and the planets—and the benefits and disadvantages that are particular to each of them. The earthly signs are an examination of the states of meteorology, minerals, and mankind in particular. Then, each of these categories divides into an infinite number of sub-categories. If man were to begin contemplating the subtle wisdom of God—may He be glorified!—in forming the wing of a gnat, his

10 On the theological concept of *naẓar* in general, see al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār 1961, vol. 12 on *naẓar* and *maʿārif*; al-Ījī 1998, vol. 1.

11 Reading *al-tadabbur* for *al-tadbīr* in the text.

reason would fail him before he arrived at the lowest stage of these wise principles and beneficial lessons.

AL-RĀZĪ 1981, 17:176–177

Here Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī divides signs into two large categories based on location: signs located in the celestial spheres and signs located on the earth, including the atmosphere. However, in his view, there are an infinite number of signs in sub-categories under those larger categories; God only referred to the signs that are in the heavens and the earth by way of summary presentation. Al-Rāzī states unequivocally that the signs represent the only way humans can arrive at knowledge of God, something which stresses the obligation to inspect and investigate them. Through this process, mankind can detect underlying principles that al-Rāzī terms the “wisdom” (*ḥikma*) behind them. Nevertheless, some people will not be able to accomplish this because, according to verse 10:101, God has already prevented them, decreeing that this would not be granted to them.

Commentators paid close attention to the combined imperatives *sīrū fa-nẓurū*, but they interpreted this pair in several different fashions. Al-Nisābūrī (d. 405/1014) writes:

God's word, “So travel in the land,” does not convey a command to travel. Rather, the intended meaning is a command to become aware of their circumstances. If that knowledge may be acquired without traveling in the earth, then the aim is fulfilled. It is not farfetched to say that traveling was encouraged because direct observation of the ruins of the ancients has a stronger effect than hearing (about them), as has been said: “Our traces are evidence of us, so look to our traces when we are gone.”

AL-NĪSĀBŪRĪ 1996, 2:263

Al-Nisābūrī here points out that the main obligation is to learn of the circumstances of the ancient peoples who were destroyed, and not simply to travel. Indeed, he argues that if one finds out about the earlier peoples through some other means, then it is not necessary to travel. Al-Shawkānī (d. 1250/1834) also states that the point behind the travel one is commanded to undertake is to gain knowledge of the ruins, and that if one gains this knowledge one does not need to travel, even though direct observation through travel provides particular effects that do not obtain otherwise (al-Shawkānī 1998, 1:439–440). This idea is not stated explicitly in the text, which constantly refers to travel and observation in tandem. However, it finds some support in the verses that connect God's signs with hearing rather than seeing.

In a somewhat different analysis, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī also connects the phrase *sīrū fa-nẓurū* with the obligation to observe:

God's word, "So observe" indicates that He—may He be exalted—made observation the motive for traveling. It is as if it had been said, "Travel for the purpose of observation, and do not travel as neglectful people do." His statement, "Travel in the land, then observe," indicates the general permissibility of traveling in the land for the sake of trade and other benefits and the obligation of observing the relics of those who have been destroyed. God—may He be exalted—called attention to this distinction through the word "then" (*thumma*), on account of the stark difference between obligation and permissibility.

AL-RĀZĪ 1981, 12:488

So, humans have a duty to observe, consider, and interpret botany, zoology, meteorology, and geography in order to understand that the world is governed by divine, supernatural forces. They must be adepts of astronomy and mathematics, because observation of the regularities in the universe and the motions of the stars and planets lead one to understand the fundamental truth of monotheism and deduce the implications of signs in the world around them. The signs are of different types and thus involve different sciences and categories of knowledge. Ruins, providing historical and archaeological evidence, are one prominent category of signs in the Qurʾān, they are intimately related to the history of prophecy, and humans have an obligation to investigate them in order to understand the history of God's action in the world.

7 Is the Age of Destruction Over?

There are some cases in which prophecies took place, and a large part of the audience rejected the prophet in question, without a destruction happening, the most striking examples being those of Jesus, who was rejected by the Jews, and Muḥammad, who was rejected by most of the Meccan pagans. However, the Qurʾān endeavors to keep the structure of the punishment story intact in these cases, even though they worked out differently. In place of the destruction of the Jews, the Qurʾān suggests that their punishment was to suffer political domination by the Christians (Q 61:14). With regard to the Prophet Muḥammad's people, the parallel element in their story to the annihilation of earlier peoples is the threat of punishment on the Day of Judgment.¹²

¹² For an analysis of this idea in *sūrat al-Qamar*, see Stewart 2000.

Drawing on the Qur'ān, later commentators voice the theory that God's former practice was to destroy disobedient nations but that He changed his practice after the time of Moses and Pharaoh. Thus, according to this view, the last true destruction was that of Egypt's people. This theory is based mainly on Q 28:43:

We gave Moses the scripture, after We destroyed the earlier generations, to provide insight for the people, guidance, and mercy, so that they take heed.

Many commentators took this verse to mean that *all* the destructions of bygone nations occurred before God gave Moses the scripture. Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373) explains the verse as follows:

God reports His favors to His worshiper and messenger Moses ... including His revelation of the Torah to him after he destroyed Pharaoh and his chiefs. God's word, "after We destroyed the earlier generations" means that, after the revelation of the Torah, He did not punish an entire nation. Rather, he commanded the believers to fight those pagans who were enemies of God.

IBN KATHĪR 1998, 6:215

Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) records a report attributed to Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī (d. 74/693–694):

God did not destroy a nation through a punishment from the heavens or the earth after the Torah was sent down to the surface of the earth, except for the city who were turned into apes. Have you not considered that God states, "We gave Moses the scripture, after We destroyed the earlier generations, to provide insight for the people, guidance, and mercy, so that they might take heed."

Q 28:43; AL-ṬABARĪ 2001, 18:259

In his anti-Christian polemical work *al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ* ("The Correct Response"), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) includes a similar passage:

Before the revelation of the Torah, God used to destroy those who rejected the prophets with the punishment of annihilation—a swift punishment by which God would destroy all of the rejectors, just as He destroyed the folk of Noah, and just as He destroyed 'Ād, Thamūd, the people of Midian, and the folk of Lot, and just as He destroyed the folk of Pharaoh. When

He sent Moses, He made many signs apparent, so that the memory and report of them would remain on the earth, since he did not destroy a nation by annihilation after the revelation of the Torah.

IBN TAYMIYYA 1999, 6:441–442, cf. 2:251

Though Ibn Taymiyya does not cite any particular verses, all of these texts appear to be based on an interpretation of 28:43, understanding it to mean that God only destroyed entire nations before the time of Moses, and particularly before God's revelation of the Torah to him. Both Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr add to this the idea that God's threatened punishment in this world was transmuted to defeat at the hands of the believers, who were commanded to fight the unbelievers. Ibn Taymiyya also adds an explanation for the change, suggesting that the fame and ubiquity of God's signs were such that peoples would no longer engage in outright disbelief to the same extent, and it would not be necessary to destroy them all.

8 Exceptional Ruins

Some exceptional ruins mentioned in the Qur'ān are not the product of destruction stories and so do not convey the same message about prophecy. Solomon's Temple and other structures in Jerusalem are mentioned prominently in the text (Q 17:7, 34:12–15), and the implication is that their remains are visible. A reading of *sūrat al-Naml* suggests that somewhere in the vaults of Solomon there is a fantastic throne that belongs to the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:38–42). One also imagines that one of Solomon's buildings contains a room with a glass floor that looks like a pool of water (Q 27:44). Yet another reference to a prominent relic occurs in the story of the sleepers in *sūrat al-Kahf* (Q 18), which is clearly related to the well-known Christian story of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, about seven youths who were saved from the persecutions of the Roman Emperor Decius (r. 249–251 CE) by being miraculously put to sleep for over three hundred years. The story as recounted in the Qur'ān implies that the cave itself is an important site and that it was made into a shrine or place of worship to commemorate their being saved. The story also mentions *al-Raqīm*, a term that has puzzled commentators. Examination of *sūrat al-Kahf* along with Christian versions of the tale suggests that *al-Raqīm* here means *marqūm* “inscribed, engraved” and refers to a metal tablet that was erected at the site to memorialize it (Griffith 2008, esp. 125–127). None of these examples, however, are associated with punishment stories, so the significance of ruins in these cases is distinct, though in this last example it serves a parallel didactic function, but focusing on God's salvific, rather than destructive, power.

9 Qur'ānic Commands to Observe and Analyze Ruins

The punishment stories are not simply tales from a time that has been irretrievably lost and may only be recalled in legend. They are connected with and retrievable in the present through physical, observable remains. The Qur'ān stresses mankind's obligation to detect, observe, and analyze ancient ruins and to draw specific historical conclusions from them. The obligation to observe the physical remains is frequently stated quite explicitly and directly. The edifying process of examining the archaeological remains of earlier civilizations is emphasized by the paired verbs *yasīrū/sīrū ... fa-yanẓurū/fa-nẓurū* "travel/walk ... then observe." Twelve verses exhibit this structure. Six instances involve paired plural imperatives in the following phrase—*sīrū fī l-arḍi fa-nẓurū* "Travel/walk in the land, then observe!" (Q 3:137, 6:11, 16:36, 27:69, 29:20, 30:42); one of these, 6:11, uses *thumma* "then" in place of the conjunction *fa-*. Six other instances are rhetorical questions in the third-person plural negative *a-(wa/fa-) lam yasīrū fī l-arḍi fa-yanẓurū* "Have they not traveled/walked in the land and then observed?" (Q 12:109, 30:9, 35:44, 40:21, 82, 47:10). An additional verse does not include the verb *fa-yanẓurū*, even though it implies a similar sequence of traveling and observation: "Have they not traveled in the land, and had hearts with which they comprehend ...?" (Q 22:46). One might term such statements "topographical scrutiny directives"—i.e., instructions to inspect and contemplate the features of the landscape. Some are direct commands, and the others, although they are rhetorical questions, nevertheless convey the idea that it is incumbent upon the audience to travel in the earth and to observe the land.

The form of these directives deserves some focused analysis. These particular statements are couched in the plural, either direct imperatives in the second-person plural or indicative verbs, negative and interrogative, in the third-person plural, suggesting in both cases that they refer to a general obligation. The particular verb used, *sīrū* or *yasīrū*, refers to the physical aspect of traveling. It suggests traversing distances but also the process of walking or marching overland. The use of the phrase *fī l-arḍ* "in the earth" or "in the land" is primarily intended to invoke not the great expanse of the earth but rather the immediacy and tangible nature of the experience—that the people addressed are pictured as walking directly among the ruins strewn across the landscape in question, making close contact with the physical features of the terrain.

Observation is just as important as the physical contact. The second verb used, *fa-nẓurū* "then observe" or *fa-yanẓurū* "(and as a result) have they not observed ...?" suggests that the travel and direct contact with ruins should be accompanied by observation, contemplation, or analysis of these historical signs. The modern Syrian commentator Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī

(d. 1914), in explaining the term *al-sā'ihūn* in Q 9:112, connects it with the verb *sāra*, *yasīru*, making the following statement, in rhyming *saj'*:

One must interpret the word *al-sā'ihūn* according to its original, plain meaning, and it is "those who travel through the lands (*diyār*) to stand before the ruins (*āthār*), in order to derive spiritual admonition and moral lessons (*i'tibār*) thereby, and for other benefits that history has defined."

AL-QĀSIMĪ 1957, 3276

Here, al-Qāsimī's *saj'* neatly stresses the connection between traveling in the lands, observing ruins, and the moral lessons one is supposed to derive from the experience. Typical Qur'ānic examples include the following:

Customs have passed away before you, so travel in the land and observe how was the end of those who denied.

Q 3:137, cf. 6:11, 27:69, 30:42

These instructions to observe are general, but others add information about the specific characteristics of the ancient civilization in question that the observer is supposed to glean.

Have they not traveled in the land and observed how was the end of those before them? They were greater than they in strength.

Q 35:44, cf. 40:82

Here the observer is supposed to reach certain conclusions about the power and sophistication of past nations. The size of the ruins and the craftsmanship required to build the original monuments convince observers that the ancient builders were more powerful and technically advanced than the contemporary audience. Despite their strength, they were nevertheless annihilated, punished by God.

As explained above, punishment stories and the ruins associated with them are fundamentally tied to prophecy. A number of these topological scrutiny directives include references to messengers, making clear that the destruction of ancient nations is directly related to the prophetic missions that were sent to them.

We have not sent before you save men whom We inspire, who are inhabitants of the cities. Have they not traveled in the land and observed how was the end of those who came before them?

Q 12:109

The “men whom We inspire” are prophets whom God has sent to various nations. Here, the text implies that the ruins are the direct results of prophetic missions of the past, though it does not recount in detail the interactions or events that tie them together. Nevertheless, the statement *wa-mā arsalnā min qablīka* “We have not sent before you” in the second person singular, implies a comparison between the Prophet Muḥammad and prophets of the past. Several other passages make a similar causal connection between prophecy and ruins.

We have sent among every nation a messenger, [commanding,] “Worship God and avoid idols!” Among them were those whom God guided, and among them were those whom error befell. So, travel in the land, then observe how was the end of those who denied.

Q 16:36, cf. 30:9, 40:21–22

According to these passages, God sent messengers to each ancient nation, and the messenger conveyed God’s message to his people. The members of the nation, or most of them, rejected the message and were consequently destroyed. The ruins remain as tangible evidence of their disobedience and punishment. Observation of their ruins leads to the conclusion that the bygone nations were more powerful than the moderns and that they produced more substantial monuments than the moderns are capable of constructing.

Ruins show the regularity not only of God’s acts of destruction of former nations but also of humans’ failure to take heed of the evidence immediately before them.

And how many a city did We destroy while it was committing wrong, so that it is now fallen into ruin? How many an abandoned well, and how many a lofty palace? So, have they not traveled in the land and had hearts with which they comprehend and ears with which they hear? For, indeed, it is not eyes that are blind, but the hearts within their breasts that are blind.

Q 22:45–46

This use of *ka-ayyin* as an interrogative equivalent to *kam* “O how many?!” stresses the plurality of the ruins mentioned, and the list of different types of ruins—cities, wells, and palaces—stresses their variety. The passage emphasizes as well the process that observers ought to go through to arrive at God’s intended message, but which they fail to pursue to completion. Ears, eyes, and hearts all refer to the process of sensing and interpreting, but there is a distinction at the end between eyes, as organs that merely sense, and hearts, as organs that allow one to comprehend. The observers’ eyes are not blind, so

they actually see the ruins, but their hearts are blind, so they do not derive the lesson that was supposed to be conveyed.

The term *‘āqiba* “end, outcome” occurs often in the ruins discourse, especially with the topological scrutiny directives, and focuses on the fate of the destroyed nations, crucially emphasizing the lasting result. Several groups or designations of the destroyed peoples are invoked and connected with the term *‘āqiba* “outcome.” The most general, or neutral term, is *alladhīna min qablihim* or *alladhīna kānū min qablihim* “those who were before them” (Q 12:109, 27:51, 30:9, 35:44, 40:21, 82, 47:10) or *alladhīna min qablu* “those who were before” (Q 30:42). The annihilated peoples, however, are most often represented by participles in the masculine plural form. Several of these describe their negative transgressions: *al-mukadhdhibīn* “those who denied or rejected” (Q 3:137, 6:11, 16:36, 43:25); *al-mujrimīn* “those who did wrong” or “sinners” (Q 7:84, 27:69); *al-mufsidīn* “those who spread corruption” (Q 7:86, 103, 27:14), *al-ẓālimīn* “those who were unjust” (Q 10:39, 28:40). These all point to the infractions on account of which they were destroyed. The plural serves not only to indicate the large numbers of people in the nations that were punished but also to render the judgment general, applicable to other similar nations as well. Only one instance refers to their transgression with a noun, *makrihim* “their cunning” (Q 27:51). The participle *al-mundharīn* “those who were warned,” which occurs twice in this construction (Q 10:73, 37:73), ties the punished nations not to their own wrongdoing but to their role as recipients of prophetic preaching. This last term serves to stress that their destructions formed part of the unfolding of prophetic missions of the past.

The term *‘āqiba* also appears in connection with unbelievers in several other verses that adopt distinct structures:

Then the end of those who did evil was evil, because they rejected the signs of God and scoffed at them.

Q 30:10, cf. 65:8–9, 59:16–17

Here, the end envisaged is destruction, as is true of most of the other examples, while in Q 59:16–17 it is an eternity in Hell. In all cases, the punishment occurs as a recompense for some infraction: rejecting God’s signs, disobeying God’s command, denying his messengers, or rejecting faith.

While the term *‘āqiba* is overwhelmingly associated with the fate of unbelievers and wrongdoers in the Qur’ān, a few passages refer to the pleasant fate that awaits believers. It is noteworthy that while believers also have a fate that is contemplated in the Qur’ān, that fate is relatively infrequently described using the term *‘āqiba*, which is generally reserved for negative outcomes. This is so

even when believers are involved in the punishment stories under consideration here, in which they are either explicitly or implicitly rescued and spared annihilation, as is the prophet. In general, when the fate of believers is alluded to, they are designated by the participle *al-muttaqīn* “those who fear God.”

So be patient! The end belongs to the God-fearing (*lil-muttaqīn*).

Q 11:49, cf. 28:83

One verse uses the noun *taqwā* “fear of God,” as if personifying the quality itself: *al-‘āqibatu lit-taqwā* “the fated outcome belongs to the fear of God” (Q 20:132).

The term *‘āqiba* occurs in several statements that ascribe the control of fate or historical outcomes ultimately to God: *wa-li-llāhi ‘āqibatu l-umūr* (Q 22:41) and *wa-ilā llāhi ‘āqibatu l-umūr* (Q 31:22). In all cases the term *‘āqiba* suggests that whatever happened to the past nation was complete and decisive, neither a long, drawn-out process nor an incomplete action. And, in most cases, the end or outcome referred to was also physical annihilation. In two additional cases, the term *‘āqibat al-dār* “the fate of the abode,” which does not refer explicitly to any particular people, appears; these will be discussed below.

Like the punishment stories generally, the ruins discourse conveys a typological message, presenting historical cases as instructive *exempla* for the contemporary audience. The following topological scrutiny directive stresses the threat implied by such ruins for contemporary unbelievers.

Have they not traveled in the land and seen how was the end of those before them? God utterly destroyed them, and for the unbelievers are the likes thereof (*amthāluhā*).

Q 47:10

The feminine singular pronoun *-hā* in the phrase “the likes thereof” (*amthāluhā*) here appears to refer to the *‘āqiba* “end, fate” mentioned in the verse, or perhaps to the implied acts of destruction on the part of God. This statement not only stresses God’s destructive power; it also promises a similar fate for the contemporary unbelievers.

10 Walking and Physical Evidence

The passages described above and termed “topological scrutiny directives” instruct the audience to “travel in the land” and observe. The choice of the particular verb *sāra*, *yasīru*, which means at base “to walk,” together with mention

of the land, serves to focus on the agents' physical experience, not so much traversing great distances to reach a particular goal as marching along roads, paths, and various sorts of terrain. It is as if the face of the earth were a scroll or page laid out flat, and contemporary observers are meant to read the signs evident in the ruins as if reading text on the page. This image of walking upon legible ruins recalls a scene in John Webster's (d. ca. 1634) play *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612–1613), in which Antonio enters the ruins of an abbey in Milan and remarks, "I do love these ancient ruins: / We never tread upon them but we set / Our foot upon some reverend history" (Webster 2015, 106 [Act 5, Scene 3]). This remark captures both the physical contact and the sense of reading chronicles of the past that are encapsulated in the Qur'ānic passages. That such an interpretation is intended appears to be confirmed by the description of the ruins of Lot's city in *sūrat al-Ḥijr*, mentioned above:

We turned their city upside down and rained on them a shower of clay stones.

There are truly signs in this for those who can decipher them—

It is still there on the highway—

There truly is a sign in this for those who believe.

Q 15:74–77

This passage states that the ruins of Lot's city are signs for *al-mutawassimīn* (Q 15:75), those who are able to decipher marks or writing. They are portrayed, literally, as reading signs inscribed on the landscape.

Other passages likewise stress the physical act of walking but use the verb *marra*, *yamurru* "to pass." One such usage occurs in a parable that is somewhat different from the typical punishment story:

Or like the one who passed over a township which had fallen into ruin and asked, "How will God bring this to life after its death?" So God caused him to die for a hundred years, and then He revived him. He asked, "How long have you tarried?" The man responded, "I have tarried a day or part of a day."

Q 2:259

The point of the parable is to dispel doubt about God's ability to perform the physical Resurrection, but what is relevant to the present discussion is that the man's "passing over" the ruins of the town provokes him to ponder the evidence he sees and then to ask about it. Another of these passages occurs in a typical punishment narrative and has been mentioned above. After a short narrative of the prophecy of Lot and the destruction of his people occurs the statement:

wa-innakum la-tamurrūna ‘alayhim muṣbiḥīn wa-bi-l-layli a-fa-lā ta‘qilūn* “Indeed you pass over them in the morning, and at night. Then will you not comprehend?” (Q 37:137–138). Again, the verb “pass over” stresses the immediacy of the ruins that are intended to serve as signs. The use of the verb *marra*, *yamurru* “pass” followed by the preposition *‘alā* “on, over” instead of the more common *bi-* “by” suggests that the contemporaries are not encountering the ruins at any distance—they are walking directly on top of them. This immediacy is stressed here by the reference to night and day, suggesting repeated, frequent contact. Similarly, *sūrat Yūsuf* (Q 12) ends with a general conclusion about prophecy, including the following remark: *wa-ka-ayyin min āyatin fī l-samāwāti wa-l-arḍi yamurrūna ‘alayhā wa-hum ‘anhā mu‘riḍūn* “And how many a sign within the heavens and earth do they pass over while they turn away therefrom” (Q 12:105). Again, the phrase *yamurrūna ‘alayhā* suggests the immediacy of contact, even though proximity might be literally impossible with regard to signs in the heavens. It also suggests that those who are exposed to the signs willfully ignore them and their implications, despite the close contact.

Yet other similar passages use the verb *mashā*, *yamshī* “to walk.” Two instances occur in general statements referring to the destruction of earlier generations.

Then, has it not become clear to them how many generations We destroyed before them as they walk among their dwellings (*yamshūna fī masākinihim*)? Indeed, in that are signs for those who have intellects.

Q 20:128, cf. 32:26

Both verses employ the phrase *yamshūna fī masākinihim* “they walk among their dwellings.” As in the examples presented above, these verses stress the immediacy and physicality of the contact by referring to the physical act of walking. Use of the preposition *fī* “in” suggests their location in the very midst of the ruins. In addition, the choice of the term *masākin* “dwellings” is intriguing. Of course, the punished people in question no longer live there—they are *former* dwellings—but the word suggests that the contemporary investigators are engaged in imagining the vanished people as they used to exist, living their lives and going about their daily business in yesteryear. And this task of imagination must be accomplished through observation of the surviving outlines and detailed features of their dwellings. A related verse that uses the term *masākin*, though it does not refer explicitly to walking, is the following: *wa-‘Ādan wa-Thamūda wa-qad tabayyana lakum min masākinihim ...* “And [We destroyed] ‘Ād and Thamud, and that has become clear to you from their dwellings. ...” (Q 29:38). The verb *tabayyana* “it has become clear” emphasizes the logical conclusions arrived at from observation of the former dwellings (*masākin*) of ‘Ād and Thamūd, again suggesting contemplation of

the residents' activities. Yet another passage that uses the term *masākin* "dwellings" in conjunction with the verb *tabayyana* "to become clear" is Q 14:44–45:

So warn the people of the Day when punishment will come to them, and when those who committed wrong will say, "Our Lord! Grant us a delay of a short time, so that we might answer Your call and follow the messengers." Did you not swear in the past that your wealth would have no end?

You dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged themselves, and it became clear to you how We dealt with them. We gave you many examples.

Q 14:44–45

Again, the unbelieving contemporaries of the Prophet Muḥammad are supposed to deduce knowledge of past history from the ruins that they observe. One especially interesting feature of this passage is its use of paronomasia in the phrase *sakantum fī masākini lladhīna ḡalamū anfusahum* "You dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged themselves." The ruins are nearby and observable, and the term *masākin* emphasizes the activities of the former dwellers who have left traces in the ruins, but an additional notion is that the contemporary disbelievers have lived in and among the very same dwellings, suggesting repeated and intense contact with the signs. It is not entirely clear whether the passage means that they actually occupied ancient, ruined buildings, or whether the phrase means only that they have dwelt in the same territory formerly occupied by the destroyed peoples, but the implication of particularly intense and frequent contact is undeniable.

One might be tempted to connect the minute and keen observation of ruins with other examples of such observation in pre-Islamic Arabian culture, such as attention to the traces of the beloved's campsite and myriad other motifs, including the description of the oryx, lightning, or various other plants and animals, or of the routes and stopping places of nomadic tribes in the poetic ode. One might also connect it to observation of the stars, the stations of the moon, or weather conditions, or to the detection of subtle signs on the part of desert guides, hunters, and trackers of errant camels or enemy raiding parties, or to the crafts of *fīrāsa* and *qiyāfa*, in which physiognomy served to determine the parentage of children and livestock.

The question arises as to whether these discussions of ruins were simply engaging in a literary trope or motif or were referring to actual, physical ruins. After all, many of the ruins mentioned, such as the Pyramids of Egypt, were not close by, and presumably, the exact location of Noah's Ark was not even known. One may argue, though, that in all cases the ruins and relics mentioned were *understood* to be factual and tangible, and not legendary or mythological. After all, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other "cities of the plain" in

Genesis, which one may claim was one of the main inspirations for the entire Qur'ānic genre of punishment stories, was based on the real existence of ruined cities on the southern plain of the Jordan River valley. Even if members of the Prophet's audience may not themselves have seen the ruins of the Ma'rib Dam in Yemen, or the Egyptian Pyramids, or the ruins of Thamūd or Midian, they had met traders, merchants, or pilgrims who had, or who knew third parties who had, and were thus aware of their existence as archaeological sites. The implication is that at least some of the sites of ruins were near enough for a representative portion of the audience to have visited and witnessed them for themselves. The command to travel in the land and to observe refers to intense, keen investigation, along with mental effort to derive specific conclusions from the physical evidence. Many references stress the physicality and proximity of the sites. Observers know where it lies and are able to observe and examine it. They can physically pace on its surface, searching for clues. All this suggests that man has an obligation not simply to listen to these stories in the Qur'ān and to contemplate the course of salvation history but also to explore the sites of ancient ruins and to draw conclusions directly from the physical evidence of relics and remains.

The Qur'ānic connection between history, ruins, and instructive moral lessons, *ibar*, or the reception of such lessons, *i'tibār*, found widespread reception in Islamic letters. The famous specialist in the study of *ḥadīth*, Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), wrote a book of biographies with the title *al-ʿIbar fī Khabar man Ghabar* ("The Lessons, on Reports of Those Who Have Passed Away"). Ibn Khaldūn's (d. 808/1406) famous *Muqaddima* ("The Introduction"), is an introduction to his history, titled *Kitāb al-ʿIbar wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada' wa-l-Khabar fī Tārīkh al-ʿArab wa-l-Barbar wa-man ʿĀsarahum min Dhawī al-Sha'n al-Akbar* ("The Book of Lessons and the Record of Beginnings and Endings, on the History of the Arabs, the Berbers, and Powerful Contemporary Rulers"). ʿAbd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī's (d. 629/1231) work *al-Ifāda wa-l-I'tibār* ("Learning and Contemplation") refers pointedly to *i'tibār* because it focuses, at least in part, on Egyptian antiquities. Similarly, al-Maqrīzī's (d. 845/1442) famous topography of Egypt, known popularly as *al-Khiṭaṭ* ("Topography"), is actually entitled *al-Mawāʿiẓ wa-l-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-l-Āthār* ("Pious Counsel and the Derivation of Lessons through Mention of Topography and Relics"). Again, the main reason behind the use of the term *i'tibār* in the title, and also of *mawāʿiẓ*, is the work's focus on historical buildings and their imaginative connection with historical lessons to be learned. The travels of Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) provide an intriguing example on the grounds that he picks up on a very particular Qur'ānic verse that we have analyzed above. In that work he uses the term *āya lil-mutawassimīn* "a sign for those who can decipher" three times: to describe the Lighthouse at Alexandria, to describe pilgrims who

get lost on the way back from the pilgrimage and barely make it to ‘Aydhāb, starving and dying of thirst, and to describe his rescue from a shipwreck off the coast of Sicily near Messina (Ibn Jubayr 1964, 14, 47, 295). Ibn Jubayr uses this distinctive phrase to connect his travels with the religious obligation of deriving useful moral lessons from the phenomena he encounters on the way. Some of what he encounters, like the monumental lighthouse of Alexandria, are impressive monuments, while others are not; nevertheless, the element of being admonished by God through his signs in the world remains intact.

11 Historical Principles

What are the implications of the Qur’ānic discourse on ruins? The Qur’ānic theory of signs is about God’s communication with mankind through nature. God intends to convey certain messages to mankind, and just as he sends prophets and scriptures to them, he also places messages for them to detect in the world around them. Suggestions that many of these messages should be obvious to the observers must be understood as a type of hyperbole, since the text repeatedly indicates that mankind regularly fails to understand the message and to take it to heart. The process of detecting or decoding the message, like that of reading the scripture, or grasping a prophet’s message, is not simply automatic. Noticing God’s signs and retrieving the message behind them involves attention, effort, and the use of reason. As explained above in relation to signs, the Qur’ān repeatedly emphasizes mankind’s powers of perception, invoking human organs—*ādhān* “ears,” *a’yun* “eyes,” *abṣār* “eyes,” *af’ida* “hearts,” *qulūb* “hearts, minds,” *albāb* “hearts, minds,” *nuhā* “intellects”—in order to refer to their capacity to sense, reflect, interpret, and comprehend, and using the verbs *yafqahu* “understand,” *ya’qilu* “comprehend,” *yatafakkaru* “reflect,” *yadhhdhakkaru* “take heed,” and *yasma’u* “hear” to represent the process of reflection, interpretation, and comprehension.

The signs are not all of the same type, suggesting that mankind must bring several sorts of attention and several fields of knowledge and experience and sorts of reason to bear. Signs in the motions of the sun, the moon, the stars, and the planets require attention to astronomy. Signs in mountains, plains, and seas require attention to geography. Signs in plants and animals require attention to botany, zoology, agriculture, and animal husbandry. And signs in ruins and relics, the category addressed here, require attention to history and archaeology.¹³

13 Nicolai Sinai has called these “historical signs,” as opposed to “cosmic signs” (Sinai 2017b, 169–174).

An examination of the Qur'ānic corpus of punishment stories as a whole with an eye to their historical aspect leads one to detect regular patterns that one might call historical laws or principles. The most important principle one arrives at is that prophecy is a real, factual phenomenon, and not the nebulous claim of diviners. Prophecy is one of God's main methods of communication with mankind, and it is a historical process with real consequences in this world, as well as the next. There should be no doubt about it, because it leaves physical, tangible, observable evidence.

Prophecy is a regular, and not a haphazard or unpredictable, phenomenon. It follows a known, detectable pattern. Prophecy is predictable because the characters involved in the interactions of prophets with their peoples behave in similar ways. First, God's nature does not change. He is not historically contingent. He has a customary way of dealing with the world that is reflected in the history of prophecy, and He abides by certain rules. For example, He does not punish a people without delivering His messages to them and warning them first. His method is evident from historical signs and may be understood by observers who pay attention to and analyze those signs. Secondly, there is also a certain regularity in the persons of the prophets. They share certain characteristics, such as honesty, fidelity, devotion, steadfastness, and the avoidance of sin; on account of these attributes God chose them in the first place. As a result, they tend to carry out their prophetic charge in similar manners. Also, their charges from God are evidently similar; they have the same essential task to perform. For all these reasons, prophecy forms the basis for a repeated pattern of historical existence. Thirdly, the peoples addressed by the prophets also behave in predictable ways. Human nature is understood to be more or less the same throughout history. People are stubborn and ungrateful, not to mention being prone to all sorts of vices. They generally do not want to change their ways on short notice, and the vast majority of them may be counted on to reject the messages of the prophet, to mock and ridicule him, and to refuse to heed his warnings. One passage especially stresses their moral corruption (Q 17:15–17). The lone exception to this rule is that of the people of Jonah, who actually listened to their prophet and so were spared destruction (Q 10:98).

All of these regularities of behavior are captured in the term *sunna* "customary way." The Qur'ān refers to *sunnat Allāh* "God's customary way" (Q 33:62, 35:43, 40:85, 48:23), which is presented as unchanging: "You will find no change in God's way" (Q 35:43, 48:23). Prophets also have a *sunna*, for the Qur'ān evokes "the customary way of those whom We [God] have sent" (Q 17:77). Past nations also have a *sunna*, for the Qur'ān refers to *sunnat al-awwālīn* "the customary way of the ancients," referring to their usual tendency to reject prophecy (Q 15:13, 18:55). The term appears prominently in conjunction with a topical

scrutiny directive in the following verse: “Customs have passed away before you, so travel in the land and observe how was the end of those who denied” (Q 3:137). The fact that the term *sunna* is applied to all three main characters in the drama of the punishment stories suggests that they belong to the same system and therefore operate within the constraints of that system. Indeed, the term *sunan* “customs” in Q 3:137, a metonym for the past nations themselves, suggests the centrality of their adherence to these constraints.

Some later Muslims clearly envisaged, that the moral duty of scrutinizing the ruins of earlier civilizations had been restricted or even abrogated after ancient times, or at least from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad on. Al-Ṭabarī records the following *ḥadīth* report on the authority of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Zuhri (d. 124/741–742):

When the Prophet—God bless him and grant him peace—passed by al-Ḥijr [the abode of Thamūd], he commanded, “Do not enter the dwellings of those who wronged themselves, unless you do so while weeping lest the like of what befell them befall you.” Then he announced, “This is the Valley of Aversion,” upon which he raised his head and quickened his pace until he had crossed the valley.

AL-ṬABARĪ 2001, 10:298

The destructions of earlier nations are not simply all the same. Just as prophets are equivalent in their basic functions and modes of operation but nevertheless have distinctive qualities, so, too, do the destructions of past nations occur in distinct fashions, even though the causes and the results are the same in a general sense. Noah’s people were destroyed by a universal flood. Ād was destroyed by a fierce wind. Thamūd was destroyed by a great shout or cataclysm. God overturned Lot’s cities and caused fire and brimstone to rain down upon them. While it is important for observers to understand the general pattern, it is also important for them to note the specific attributes of each case. This is emphasized by the use of the interrogative *kayfa* “how” rather than *mā* “what” in the topical scrutiny directives.

Say: travel in the land, then observe *how* was the end of those who did wrong.

Q 27:69, cf. 47:10

The interrogative *kayfa* “how” suggests that one must focus not on the mere fact that they were destroyed but on the particular way in which they were destroyed. This is understood to be an important part of God’s workings in the

world: the pattern is the same in general, but God is able to accomplish His ends in various ways, and those ways may be detected from the evidence left behind.

In addition, ruins are evidence of a historical process of political succession that is punctuated by prophecies and destructions and controlled by God. In this pattern, God allows certain nations to grow prosperous and powerful through His blessings to them. They often grow arrogant on account of their power and fail to give appropriate thanks to God for the gifts that they enjoy. God often does not punish them immediately, but “We let them enjoy themselves” (*matta’nāhum*) for a time (Q 10:98, 25:18, 26:205, 37:148, cf. *matta’u*, 43:29). God then sends them a prophet as a warner, and their interaction with the prophet follows the pattern of prophetic missions described above. They are punished for rejecting the prophet with annihilation in some form; only the prophet and a small group of believers are spared. After this, another nation rises up in their stead. The rise of another nation is often described as God’s act of selecting that nation for favor, either using verb *istakhlaḥa*, *yastakhliḥu* “appointing a successor” (Q 6:133, 7:129, 11:57, 24:55 [twice]) or the periphrasis *ja’ala* (in various forms) “designated” ... *khalīfatan* “a successor” (Q 2:30, 38:26), or ... *khulafā’* “successors” (Q 7:69, 74, 27:62) or ... *khalā’if* “successors” (Q 6:165, 10:14, 73, 35:39).¹⁴

Two categories of succession are evident from the examples provided in the text. The first, which is more prevalent, involves the fall of a dominant nation to be followed by the rise of a subsequent one. They do not inhabit the same city or even the same region, but live in distinct, widely separated places. The idea is merely that one nation arises, becomes powerful, and suffers a downfall, after which another nation rises and becomes powerful: “Your Lord, who has no need, is possessed of mercy: If He wills, He will banish you and appoint after you whoever He wills, just as he made you arise from the progeny of another folk” (Q 6:133). It is understood that their rise and downfall are due to the favor and wrath of God, respectively, and that God is in control of the entire process of succession. This process is not simply a function of other forces of history. Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī explains that this must be so for the Qur’ānic logic to hold up:

The first question is: Why is it not permissible to say, “The punishment which afflicted ‘Ād, Thamūd, the people of Lot, and the others did not occur on account of their unbelief and their obstinacy, but rather occurred on account of the conjunctions of the stars and their connections, as the astrologers have agreed?” If this possibility is entertained, then the goal

14 On the theory of historical succession in general and the term *istikhlāf*, see especially Fischer 2001; Sinai 2017a, 208–209.

of admonishment would not be accomplished, because admonishment only obtains if we are certain that the descent of that punishment was on account of their unbelief and their obstinacy.

AL-RĀZĪ 1981, 24:529

A number of passages referring to this type of succession use the verb *ansha'a*, *yunshi'u* “to raise up,” also with God as the agent:

Then We raised up after them another generation.

Q 23:31, cf. 23:42, 21:11, 6:6

Again, the text stresses that God is in control of the process of succession. The favor He shows to a particular nation of the past was a test of their behavior. If they were ungrateful, arrogant, or sinful, they would be destroyed, and another nation would take their place as recipients of God's favor. The fact that particular successors, like Thamūd, did not inhabit the former territory of their predecessors, ʿĀd, indicates that the successors usually, or often, do not take over and settle in, or in proximity to, the predecessors' ruins.

In the second category of succession, the successors inhabit the same region as their predecessors, and the believers take over that territory when the unbelievers, their pagan foes, are defeated and eliminated. The chief example of this are the Egyptians, with their ruler, Pharaoh, and the Israelites. Many passages in the Qurʾān suggest that, rather than fleeing Egypt outright, as occurs in Exodus, the Israelites end up inheriting Egypt. Moses did lead the Sons of Israel to escape from Pharaoh, but several passages suggest that they ended up resettling in Egypt after the destruction of the Egyptians. Other passages describe the promised land in a way that suggests that it was quite broad, encompassing Egypt, the Sinai, and Palestine.¹⁵ Several passages suggest, additionally, that the case of Moses and Pharaoh was not isolated but one instance of the general principle that believers will succeed the unbelievers. This idea is conveyed by the verse “We wrote in the Psalms, after the [earlier] Scripture: ‘My righteous servants shall inherit the earth’” (Q 21:105), which, as scholars have noted, echoes Psalms 37:29: “But the meek shall inherit the earth and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace” (Sinai 2017a, 210–211). Another similar verse, which even more clearly expresses a general application, reads “The Earth belongs to God; He bequeaths it to whom He will of His creatures. And the end belongs to the God-fearing” (Q 7:128). The concept of inheritance may be seen to apply to this category of succession in particular. In one case, however,

15 This has been discussed in detail in Sinai 2017a, 207–208.

God is termed the heir: “And how many a city have We destroyed that exulted ungratefully in its Providence! Those are their dwellings, which were scarcely inhabited after them, and We were the heirs” (Q 28:58). Since God is the original owner of the land, and He had granted them the land in temporary trust, He inherits it when the people are destroyed. In this last case, the successors are elsewhere, and the dwellings of the destroyed people remain empty.

A particular use of the term *‘āqiba* also appears to refer to the idea that the believers will inevitably succeed the believers. As explained above, when *‘āqiba* occurs in construct, it is most often followed by a term referring to the people whose end or fate is being contemplated, most often the unbelievers and only occasionally the believers, as explained above. In two verses, however, the construction *‘āqibat al-dār* “the fate of the abode” appears. One reports a statement Moses made in addressing the Egyptians: “And Moses said, ‘My Lord knows better who has brought guidance from Him, and to whom will belong the fate of the abode’” (Q 28:37). Especially in light of Nicolai Sinai’s study of this material, this verse likely refers to the Israelites’ eventual inheritance of the Egyptians’ territory. The other instance of the phrase occurs in an address that the Prophet Muḥammad directs to his people: “O my people, exert yourselves as much as you are able! I, too, will exert myself! You will find out to whom the fate of the abode will belong ...” (Q 6:135). This suggests a parallel prediction that the believers of the Prophet Muḥammad’s community will inherit the land of the unbelievers.

As shown above, the signs embodied in ruins form part of a major Qur’ānic genre, that of the punishment story, and the main message conveyed by those signs has to do with the structure and logic of the punishment story. The main rhetorical point of punishment stories is typological. Peoples of the past have been punished—and usually annihilated—for not listening to their prophets and for not heeding the prophets’ warnings. Therefore, the contemporary audience—the original audience of the Prophet Muḥammad’s mission—should understand that they ought to listen to their Prophet and to heed his warnings lest they face a similar destruction. Their situation is parallel and analogous to those of bygone nations who likewise received God’s messengers. This conclusion can be drawn reliably because prophecy is regular; prophecy tends to work in a similar fashion across time, and prophetic missions tend to follow the same chronological steps. The typological consequence of the ruins discourse is that the contemporaries in the audience of the Prophet are urged to consider their own legacy and posterity: will their homes and monuments become the ruins to be viewed by future audiences?

If the interpretation of these ruins is known and provided by the Qur’ān, why is it necessary to continue to study ruins? The truth is that the Qur’ān in

many cases seems to put forward a singular, unwavering message, drawing a picture in black and white, but despite the appearance of such one-sided messages and clear dichotomies, it leaves room for exceptions and gray areas. So, for example, most passages of the Qurʾān portray the divide between good and bad as both simple and evident. Believers are clearly distinguished from unbelievers, and the difference between the two is often portrayed as both stark and obvious. In the case of the hypocrites or *munāfiqūn*, however, the matter is not clear. They appear to be believers outwardly, but they are inwardly unbelievers (Adang 2003, 3:468–472). How is one to know? In other areas of Qurʾānic discourse as well, the regularity of patterns does not preclude the existence of oddities and exceptions that merit special attention.

Realization that the Qurʾān is not as strict about dichotomy as it first appears may serve to modify the view Fred Donner has expressed on history in the Qurʾān. Many passages give the impression that prophets all resemble each other. They have similar qualities, they convey similar messages, and their missions unfold in similar ways. Nevertheless, it is clear that they have some specific qualities not shared by other prophets, as discussed above. Similarly, certain nations have characteristics not shared by the others. The people of the prophet Shuʿayb, Midian, are singled out for giving short weight and cheating in their trade transactions. ʿĀd are portrayed as exceptionally arrogant and overbearing. The same could be said of history and of the monuments and ruins. In Donner’s assessment, the intense focus of the Qurʾān on morality results in a strict dichotomy between good and evil. Similarly, Qurʾānic narratives generally portray ideal types that are characterized in a strictly polarized way, and overall, the Qurʾān evinces an ahistorical view of the world (Donner 1998, 75–84). While Donner’s assessment does capture strong patterns in the sacred text, it is on account of Qurʾānic conventions that such patterns appear to be stricter than they actually are, and his assessment does not take into account the exceptions, gaps, and extraneous details that may be obscured by the repeated and hyperbolic features of the text. Moreover, as has been argued above, a strong sense of the chronological progression of salvation history pervades the Qurʾān, and the various stages of that history are distinct and not interchangeable.

Despite the similarity of the message the ruins convey overall, they differ in detail. The presence of Noah’s Ark as a relic on a mountaintop leads one to conclude not only that Noah’s people were destroyed, but also that water had once covered the entire region. The buildings of Thamūd, carved into the valley walls, show their skill in carving rock and invite speculation about the specific tools and methods they could have used. The use of the phrase *tamurrūna ʿalayhim* “you pass over them” suggests that the annihilated people’s presence

is indicated in a tangible way by the town's ruins (Q 37:137–138). The description of the destruction of Sheba suggests that the site of the ruined dam was known in some detail. Contemporaries could observe the contrast between the few tamarisk bushes and lote trees that dotted the current landscape with the remains of the dam and the evidence of extensive irrigation and agriculture in the past. The reference to two gardens, on the right and left sides, perhaps reflects an accurate assessment of the layout of the former agricultural plantation. It appears to be a conclusion reached from an examination of the ruins of walls and irrigation channels at the site of the dam itself. Thus, the ruins of the Ma'rib dam show the methods the people of Sheba adopted for irrigation and cultivation. This information did not derive from historical reports, or even from divine inspiration concerning the unseen, but rather from the direct examination of archaeological evidence.

The particular features of the ruins and relics left behind provide particular messages to posterity, beyond the general didactic message about the fate of unbelieving peoples who reject their prophets. The replica of Pharaoh's body, whether it is a rock formation on the Red Sea coast, a mummy, or a statue in his form, should probably be understood as tangible evidence of his claim to divinity, reported in the statement *anā rabbukumū l-a'lā* "I am your highest lord!" (Q 79:24), something that none of the other rulers of bygone nations is reported to have claimed. In the story of the sleepers in the cave, one verse reports that the sun rose on the right of the cave and went down on the left. The point of this would appear to be to alert modern explorers trying to locate it that it must be a cave—marked by a plaque and provided with an adjacent chamber or chapel for worship—the mouth of which faces north. Indeed, the references to relative chronology in the punishment stories suggest that the audience of the Qur'ān is envisaged as being able to determine the relative antiquity of the destroyed nations, in addition to their distinctive characteristics, from their archaeological remains. The Qur'ān does not imply that these details are side issues, unimportant to mankind, who have already been told the main message. It implies instead the necessity of continued observation, investigation, and deduction. And, since the number of prophets is larger than the number of punishment stories in the Qur'ān—as many as 124,000, according to a famous *ḥadīth* report, (Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1895–1896, 5:265–266) there are presumably many other ruined sites to investigate and many other conclusions to be drawn.

Attention to the discourse surrounding ruins in the Qur'ān suggests that the sacred text presents an ethical paradigm in which a consequentialist morality and a utilitarian morality coexist. On the one hand, obeying the instructions of the prophets will enable latter-day societies to avoid the fate of the punished

nations of the past, while, on the other hand, adhering to upright behavioral norms will allow contemporary civilizations to flourish. The ruins of past civilizations provide tangible evidence that the punishment stories are true. They indicate not only that God exists, created the world, and continues to uphold it but also that He communicates regularly with mankind through prophecy and that He intervenes in striking and dramatic fashion in particular historical episodes of world history. He exerts power over nations, and his prophets deliver his messages to various peoples in the history of mankind. Civilizations have come to an end through denial of the truth of prophecy or through arrogance and ingratitude toward God, and this lesson is engraved physically on the surface of the Earth for later peoples to observe, decipher, and take to heart. If they successfully interpret the signs and draw the appropriate conclusions, they can avoid reliving the disasters of salvation history. The assumption of humility, the recognition of God's power, and the expression of gratitude for His gifts and blessings, along with obedience to his prophets, would enable a civilized people to avoid meeting this downfall. Successful interpretation of the signs involves effort, observation, and analysis which are the core constituents of mankind's rational faculties. The ethical obligation to adhere to God's lessons encompasses an obligation to interpret the signs and an obligation to exercise rational analysis, and the variety of God's signs entails attention to a variety of fields of knowledge, including history and archaeology.

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Divine and Human Hospitality in the Narratives of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*

Towards Qur'ānic Narrative Ethics

Hannelies Koloska

1 The Necessity for Narratives in Human Life

In the Old City of Jerusalem, less than 200 meters from the Ḥaram al-Sharīf, the well-preserved, huge residence of Lady Ṭunshuq al-Muẓaffariyya (d. 800/1398) dominates the landscape and impresses the passers-by (fig. 3.1). It was built in the late eighth/fourteenth century, and at that time with a direct view of the Dome of the Rock. The edifice was one of its kind in its time and must have been so impressive that a legal document from 796/1394 refers to the whole precinct as “lady’s hill” (*‘aqabat al-sitt*) and also Mujīr al-Dīn (d. 928/1522) mentions the grand palace in his historiographical work (Burgoyne and Richards 1987, 485; al-‘Ulaymī 1999, 108). Besides a main hall and stables on the ground floor, it comprises a big reception hall and a courtyard on the first floor and more than twenty rooms. Lady Ṭunshuq was living in Jerusalem by 781/1379 until she died in 800/1398 and with her wealth commissioned other architectural landmarks in the city, among them buildings for a Sufi order (Burgoyne and Richards 1987, 485 f.). No further information about her life is known and thus any attempt to define the original purpose of the palace remains interpretation. However, a Qur’ānic inscription framing a window and extending across the recess of the Western entrance to her palace welcomes its visitors and greets passers-by and pilgrims and may help to throw a bit of light on her way of seeing life (Van Berchem 1922, 307; see fig. 3.2):

“Enter them, in peace and security!” (46). We shall strip away all bitterness that is in their breasts; as brothers, they shall be upon couches, face to face (47); no fatigue shall ever touch them there, neither shall they ever be driven out from there (48). Tell My servants that I am the All-forgiving, the All-compassionate (49), and that My punishment is the painful punishment (50). And tell them of the guests of Abraham (51), when they entered unto him, saying, “Peace!” He said, “Behold, we fear you” (52). They said, “Don’t be afraid; we give you good tidings of a knowledgeable boy” (53).



FIGURE 3.1 Qasr al-Sitt ʿUnshuq on the left side, al-Sitt ʿUnshuq's tomb (*turba*) on the right side, picture: *private*



FIGURE 3.2 West gate with Qur'anic inscription, picture: *private*

He said, “Do you give me good tidings, though old age has smitten me? Of what do you give good tidings?” (54). They said, “We give you good tidings in truth. Do not be among those who despair!” (55). He said, “Who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, excepting those that are astray?” (56).

Q 15:46–56¹

These verses from *sūrat* al-Ḥijr describe the tranquility God bestows on the faithful in paradise (Q 46–48); they proclaim divine attentiveness and God's punitive justice (Q 15:49–50). The remaining verses unfold the visit of heavenly envoys to Abraham (Q 15:51–56). The appropriateness of the verses as ornamentation of a residence building is striking. They feature narratives of divine and human hospitality in this world and the world beyond. Although the specific reason for choosing these verses remains a matter of conjecture, they were apparently purposefully selected. Rather than a plain declaration of God's grace, this epigraphic decoration presents an imaginary storyline, affording the possibility to gain insight into the interpretation of life by al-Sitt Ṭunshuq, who, most likely, requested the inscription of these particular verses.

1 All translations are based on Arthur Arberry's (d. 1969) translation, with modifications.

Furthermore, the inscription raises a more profound question regarding the role of stories in human existence.

Many scholars underscore the ubiquity of the story in human life (Andrews 2016, 1–3), and Roland Barthes states: “[N]arrative is present in every age, every place, and in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind” (Barthes 1977, 79). In our particular case, architecture, with its structures, forms, and visual perspectives, is not only “embedded storytelling” as architect Frascari avers (Frascari 2012, 224–234); it embeds storytelling through the display of Qur’ānic narratives. Following Peter Kemp’s elaboration on the necessity to tell stories in order to interpret human life in general and one’s personal life in particular, the Qur’ānic verses on display offer a basic story of life, which “tells about our possibilities and responsibilities and opens up our world for the good life in community with the other” (Kemp 2007, 203). Al-Sitt Tunshuq’s choice, hence, reflects faith and hope in God’s promises; it presents the aspiration to follow the example of the faithful. Unfolding the depiction of paradise and the narration about Abraham’s paradigmatic faith and hospitality, alongside the statement of God’s grace and justice, the verses manifest future expectations, exhibiting the hope for unexpected gifts.

The application of verses such as the abovementioned amounts to a key that unlocks the ethical potential of Qur’ānic narratives and descriptions. I would like to argue that this epigraphy, as a case study, enables us to grasp Muslim instilling of moral notions into Qur’ānic narratives. How, then, may Qur’ānic studies and Islamic ethics benefit from studies in narratology, narrative ethics, and research about storytelling in texts, art, and architecture? Is the perception of the importance of Qur’ānic narratives for Muslim personal lives but a pleasant imagining based upon Western concepts, or does the Qur’ān, indeed, offer an inextricable junction between ethics and narratives?

This chapter seeks to address these questions and demonstrates how the ethical prospects of Qur’ānic narratives and their entanglement with its moral directives and theological proclamations may enhance our perception of the ethical dimensions of the Qur’ān. The exploration of narrativity, narrative ethics, and the investigation into the “narrative self” in disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, or literary studies in the last half-century have rendered it a self-evident—though not an undisputed—conviction that every individual and each society is rooted in narratives that determine one’s worldview and self-reflection.

Stories are deployed in every society, culture, or religion to apprehend the human condition, comprehend the driving force behind life, and comprehend and understand the unfurl vices and virtues in life (Meuter 2004, 140–155). The turn towards narrativity in the fields of Christian and Jewish theology, as

well as in philosophical and religious ethics throughout the last decades, has yielded a wide range of concepts and ideas about the necessity of narratives for the creation of self-identity, group memory, and the establishment of values and rules (see, for instance, Sternberg 1985; Mieth 2000; Fokkelman 2001).

The exploration of narrative ethics within sacred scriptures and authoritative and canonical texts is aimed at discerning the intersection between stories, storytelling, and moral values that are regarded as an integral part of the narratives. Accordingly, stories or narratives are considered messages that convey a certain moral intention, and the intended audience has the assigned role—either passively or actively—to react to the ethical appeal of the narration.

Although Qur'ānic narratives have aroused much scholarly interest, paradigms of narrative ethics for the exploration of Qur'ānic ethics have hardly been applied (Sayilgan 2015; El-Shakry 2020). To a far more significant extent, comparative studies and literary analyses of Qur'ānic narratives have been conducted.² Questions about the appropriation of Biblical lore into the Qur'ān have been addressed to an extensive degree: the significance of typological interpretation in and through the narrations has arisen considerable interest, and the repeated and modified account of a story in different Qur'ānic *sūras* has led to a number of different explanations and approaches.

The examination of the intertwinement between Qur'ānic stories and text-internal developments of ethical virtues is in its incipient stage. Muslim theologians have begun to conceptualize a systematic theology of Islam and to re-frame the Qur'ān in a way that is generative for Muslim theological discourses underway within Western academia (Saeed 2006; Ramadan 2009, 37–64; Alpyagil 2014; Harvey 2017). However, they are generally concerned with particular verses or broader subjects and hardly address the role of narratives. The following methodological considerations and the analysis of the narrative parts of *sūrat al-Ḥijr* shall, hopefully, constitute an emerging and robust scholarly discourse on narratives and ethics in the Qur'ān, which has the potential to contribute to the work of Muslim theology.

2 Narrative Ethics in the Qur'ān: A Suggested Approach

It has never been a simple matter to resort to and employ the Qur'ān as a source for establishing ethics. The awareness that the Qur'ān is not a comprehensive

2 For a historical overview, see Ikhwan 2010. The last decade saw a considerable amount of comparative studies; to mention but a few, see Reynolds 2010; Segovia 2015; 2018; Johns 2017.

and coherent catalog of norms and regulations is the driving force behind the constant re-interpretation of its ethical implications. The Qur'ān does not amount to a complete ethical treatise; instead, it confronts the audience with a variety of ethical demands and questions through different rhetorical means, such as instructions, polemical questions, descriptions, or narratives.

The Qur'ān presents a range of conflicts and problems addressing debates and discussions between the prophet, his community, and shifting opponents (Neuwirth 2019, 201–346). One possible approach to inquire about Qur'ānic ethical values and their specificity is, thus, to ask about the questions, habits, or debates that may have led to ethical statements or the adaptation and re-formulation of Jewish or Christian lore. The cautionary remarks of scholars such as Neuwirth or Stewart must be taken into consideration when approaching narratives from that perspective (Neuwirth 2019, 163–200; Stewart 2016, 42–45). They underscore the necessity to analyze *sūras* as a whole in order to arrive at satisfactory interpretations of individual narratives and to discern their rhetorical and didactic status within their immediate context. Hence, narratives are embedded in another text—the individual *sūra*—which is embedded in a historical context. Any assertion of Qur'ānic narrative ethics, thus, must be carefully made while, in tandem, relating it to the context of the narratives—the surrounding non-narrative parts.

Besides the precaution against an atomistic reading of Qur'ānic narratives without relating them to their immediate context, the awareness of the dynamics within the text may help to discern the development of ideas and the modification of arguments. The Qur'ānic narratives are part of a growing textual corpus that exhibits processes of negotiation and appropriation; the same story is thus re-told in different *sūras* addressing different situations. This assumption is based upon the premises of the chronological approach, which advocates reading the text in the supposed sequence of its revelation as the literary compression of a historical process (Sinai 2010, 418).

Subsequently, I will study the narratives of Abraham and Lot in *sūrat al-Ḥijr* following a chronological reading, which assumes that this *sūra* belongs to the second group of Meccan *sūras*, the so-called Middle Meccan *sūras* (Neuwirth 2017, 259–264). Before analyzing the hospitality ethics in the *sūra* and its narratives, I will outline the *sūra*'s overall theological focus and content.³ Finally, I shall examine possible textual or conceptual references and chart the inherent aspects that characterize hospitality in the Qur'ān.

3 Neuwirth provides a comprehensive historical-literary commentary on the *sūra*, in Neuwirth 2017, 217–266.

3 The Theological Focus and the Overall Contents of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*

Tell My servants that I am the All-forgiving, the All-compassionate (49), and that My punishment is the painful punishment (50).

These two verses present the notion of God's relationship to humankind prevalent throughout *sūra* al-Ḥijr and determine the narratives, the polemic and apologetic parts, which proceed and follow the narratives. God is presented—or, more precisely, presents himself in a first-person statement—as engaged in communicating (“tell My servants” *nabbi’ ‘ibādī*), as being forgiving and merciful (“I am the All-forgiving, the All-compassionate” *anā l-ghafūru l-raḥīm*) and as intimidating of punishment (“my punishment is the painful punishment” *‘adhābī huwa l-‘adhābu l-alīm*). The verses articulate divine sovereignty and omnipotence and manifest the divine presence as related to human beings. The earliest Qur’ānic *sūras* already emphasize the dependence of every individual on God, who acts continuously upon each one by bestowing providence, in the creation and re-creation of the world, by granting knowledge, and by direct involvement in human life and destiny (Müller 1988; Neuwirth 2011, 15–70).

Being constantly connected to God, thus, requests the encounter of the divine in the realities of life and the perception of an act-consequence relation in this life and beyond. The emphasis on reward and punishment and the lively descriptions of paradise and hell relate to the idea of a divine-human relationship in this world and the world to come. The call to encounter this enduring connection develops into establishing a theology of signs (*āyāt*) and ethics of virtues (Müller 1988, 361–62).

The Qur’ānic text induces the recognition of divine signs—in prophetic speech, historical events, natural phenomena, or in individual lives—as a leading path towards a transformation of the individual, prompting personal commitment towards God in terms of worship and towards fellow human beings by way of moral conduct. Narratives present, first and foremost, an exemplum; however, the extensive parallelism among the past stories and the current situation also unfolds a certain typology, which features predominantly as an analogous depiction of previous prophets and the Prophet Muḥammad and the equivalencing between the objecting public of the past and the contemporaneous opponents (Neuwirth 2017, 172; Griffith 2013, 64–65).

Sūrat al-Ḥijr relies upon these outlined concepts of divine-human relation, which shall lead to the accomplishment of virtuous actions. It also takes up a historical situation of harsh criticism. The pronouncement of these theological concepts has not found general recognition among the first audience. On the contrary, Muḥammad is confronted with fierce rejection, and the early

Qur'ānic proclamation is not marked by stunning success. The community, clustered around the prophet is subjected to derision and mockery (Saleh 2016).

Sūrat al-Ḥijr reflects these historical circumstances on a literary level, polemicizing against the opponents, especially in its first part (Q 15:1–49), while admonishing and encouraging the prophet in the face of distress and harassment in its last part (Q 15:85–98).⁴ The *sūra* is mainly concerned with strengthening the Prophet and his community. Its distinctive feature lies in describing a double-faced etiology of evil in this world by recounting the story of Iblīs (Q 15:26–42). This narrative explains the origin of human erring and disbelief; in tandem, it underlines the divine protection and election of the believers.

The narrative, hence, serves as an explanation for the historical and social conditions of the Qur'ānic community and delivers the promise that they shall be among God's chosen (Neuwirth 2017, 240–241). The *sūra* encourages the believers, assuring that they are being divinely protected from Iblīs, who is presented as the seducer of humankind, Q 15:39–40:

He said, "My Lord! As you have put me in the wrong, I will surely lure them on the earth, and I will surely put them in the wrong, all (39) except your devoted servants" (40).

It does not imply protection from evil treatment at the hands of fellow human beings. Still, it assures eternal salvation by protecting from falling prey to the delusions of the devil in this world. The believers are almost left unguarded by the rules of their society upon virtually abandoning their kin, and, as a result, the protective shield of their community is irrevocably lost. The following description of paradise in the *sūra* addresses this situation of defenselessness and vulnerability by creating a counter-image.

3.1 *Divine Hospitality*

But the godfearing shall be amidst gardens and fountains (45): "Enter them, in peace and security!" (46). We shall strip away all bitterness that is in their breasts; as brothers, they shall be upon couches, face to face (47); no fatigue shall ever touch them there, neither shall they ever be driven out from there (48).

4 A detailed overview of the *sūra*'s structure follows in the appendix, it is based on my research at the Corpus Coranicum project and follows the set-up of form and structure used in its commentary based on works by Angelika Neuwirth and Nicolai Sinai.

Paradise is described in opposition to earthly realities; there will be peace and safety, no bitterness, weariness, or fear. Less emphasis is placed on the amenities and delights of paradise for body and eye, prevalent in earlier and even contemporaneous descriptions (compare Q 56:10–26, 37:41–49, 44:51–57), but rather the peaceful and carefree living is stressed. The depiction renders the image of God as host: the God-fearing are invited to be God's guests and enjoy divine hospitality. This image of perfect hospitality—the creation of a secure dwelling place and blissful life—presents the blueprint for Abraham's hospitality and Lot's defense of the values of hospitality in the following narrative part. Since God provides protection and safety, human beings strive for its imitation in their life and world. Moreover, the phrase “as brothers they shall be upon couches, face to face” (*ikhwānan 'alā sururin mutaqābilīn*, Q 15:47) renders paradise not merely as an abode of believers enjoying a festival; it presents it as the home of a family which is not designated by genealogical blood ties but bonded as a community by a shared faith.⁵

One might be reminded of the prominent biblical Psalm 133, which celebrates peaceful brotherhood with a series of images of beauty starting with the following acclamation (v. 1): “Behold, how good and how pleasant (it is) for brethren to dwell together in unity.”

The ideal of a joint family and living together was a widespread metaphor in Early Christianity for the church as *communitas* of Christian believers and, furthermore, represents the eschatological expectation for the kingdom of God, whereby all shall live together peacefully (see Moxnes 1997). The Qur'anic verses might have adapted this biblical image and, through its reframing, presented the supersession of the prevailing tribal order by the new spiritual bondage among the believers: God will grant them an eternal family banquet (see Neuwirth 2014).

The following narrative section sets role models of belief and conduct, presenting the biblical-based stories of Abraham and Lot. The narratives simultaneously describe individual human behavior and the staggering of social values. Thus, they reflect on human commitment, ethical virtues, and the transformation of selected individuals. The narrative part of *sūrat al-Ḥijr* is commonly interpreted as a set of accounts of salvation and punishment stories, exemplifying and affirming God's promise of mercy and punishment, as stated in verses 49–50, which precede and introduce the narrative part. The

5 Muslim exegesis generally assigns the verse to traditions which reflect inquiries among the first prominent Muslims about those who will enter paradise, and the verse is usually related to the ten companions who will directly enter paradise (*‘ashara al-mubashshara*), such as ‘Alī (d. 40/661), Ṭalḥa (d. 36/656) or ‘Uthmān (d. 35/656) (see al-Ṭabarī 2001, 77–79).

following analysis will primarily shift the focus from divine action and turn to the presentation of human behavior.

3.2 *Encounter with the Divine When Offering Hospitality*

And tell them of the guests of Abraham (51), when they entered unto him, saying, "Peace!" He said, "Behold, we fear you" (52), They said, "Don't be afraid; we give you good tidings of a knowledgeable boy" (53), He said, "Do you give me good tidings, though old age has smitten me? Of what do you give good tidings?" (54), They said, "We give you good tidings in truth. Do not be among those who despair!" (55), He said, "Who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, excepting those that are astray?" (56).

Abraham is presented as a person who instantiates the high virtue of hospitality and is taken by surprise upon realizing the direct divine intervention in his personal life.

The story has already been presented as part of the strongly eschatological engraved *sūrat* al-Dhāriyāt (Q 51:24–37), exemplifying divine creational power (Sinai 2009, 116). The narrative in Q 51 recounts in greater detail the initial meeting of Abraham and his guests, the preparation of a fat calf, and Abraham's bewilderment about the behavior of his guests, who abstain from eating. It stages the reaction of Abraham's wife vis-à-vis the annunciation of the birth of a son, culminating in the envoys' affirmation of God's power, Q 51:31: "Thus says your lord. He is the All-wise and All-Knower." Bearing this account in mind allows for the apprehension of the distinctive character and the specifics of the narrative in the chronologically later *sūra* 15.

Both narratives unfold the initial hospitality of Abraham; both stories present the moment of unexpected and unfathomable mercy and the moment of doubt. However, the narrative in Q 15 is centered on Abraham's reaction and less on divine intervention. The description of the host inviting the strangers and providing food is omitted and, thus, deemed to be known. Instead, it focuses on Abraham's reaction to his guests' refusal to eat, Q 15:52: "When they entered unto him, saying, 'Peace!' He said, 'Behold, we fear you'" (*idh dakhalū 'alayhi fa-qālū salāman qāla innā minḵum wajilūn*).

According to the narration in Q 51, as well as other Late Antiquity traditions, the reason for Abraham's fear is widely known: The guests—heavenly envoys—refrain from earthly food and, hence, leave the offered food untouched (Speyer 1931, 148–149; Grypeou and Spurling 2009). However, they violate the customs of hospitality and offend the host with their rejection. Yet,

Abraham realizes the extraordinary nature of his guests, who do not intend to insult him with their refusal. Instead, the notion of offense turns into its opposite; Abraham regards himself as unworthy of hosting such noble guests, expressing his sense of awe and respect, Q 15:52: “Behold, we fear you” (*innā minkum wajilūn*). This statement differs from Abraham’s reaction in Q 51:28, which rather expressed fear and anxiety: “Then he felt from them a fright” (*fa-awjasa minhum khīfatan*) (Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2007, 1013). The ensuing short dialogue dispels Abraham’s fear and doubt. It may be labeled as a “*tabshūr*-pericope” (Sinai 2009, 115): No less than four times is the verb *bashshara* (“to give good tidings”) iterated: *nubashshiruka* (“we give you good tidings”), *a-bashshartumūnī* (“are you giving me good tidings”), *fa-bi-mā tubashshirūn* (“of what do you give good tidings”), *bashsharnāka* (“we give you good tidings”). This buildup intensifies the positive nature of the divine message for its recipient and effectively depicts Abraham’s hesitation. The guests herald the joyful message of begetting a son; yet, according to human consideration about his old age, Abraham rejects the message, and only upon the reassurance about its truth does he acknowledge the mercy of God. Whereas in Q 51:29, Sarah’s doubt is foregrounded, this narrative focuses on Abraham’s reaction. His hesitation does not replace the suspicion of his wife, who is not mentioned in Q 15; it instead reveals an essential aspect of Abraham’s figure: “Abraham is no longer just an uncompromising monotheist, who is revolting against the belief of his people, but in his perceptible shifting between hope and doubt he offers new possibilities of identification for ordinary believers” (Sinai 2009, 122).⁶ Abraham’s creed in Q 15:56, thus, does not only amount to a general acclamation but is geared towards the believers, who shall be comforted through this story: “He said, ‘Who despairs of the mercy of his Lord, excepting those that are astray?’” (*qāla wa-man yaqnaṭu min raḥmati rabbiḥi illā l-ḍāllūn*). In contrast to the concluding statement in Q 51:31 (“Thus says your lord. He is the All-wise and All-Knower”), which states the infinite wisdom of God, Abraham expresses his own belief in light of his encounter with the divine.

The story may, thus, be interpreted as an assertion geared at the audience that witnesses the undermining of social norms by divine messengers in this narrative. God’s merciful acts can override existing norms, and the earned grace is worth the shattering of social structures and suspends logical reasoning: Offering hospitality to strangers who do not comply with the rules of

6 For a detailed study on the intra-textual parallels in the account of Abraham’s guests in the Qur’ān, see Witztum 2019.

hospitality in the usual way and as dictated by tradition leads Abraham to an unexpected encounter with the divine that will change his life.

3.3 *The Sacred Value of Hospitality*

When the messengers came to the folk of Lot (61), he said, "Surely you are strangers!" (62). They said, "We have brought you what they were doubting (63). We have come to you with the truth, and we speak truly (64). So leave, you with your family, in a watch of the night, and walk behind them, and let none of you turn round; and depart unto the place you are commanded" (65). And We decreed for him that commandment that the last remnant of those should be wiped off in the morning (66). The people of the city came rejoicing (67). He said, "These are my guests; do not disgrace me (68). Fear God, and do not shame me!" (69). They said, "Have we not forbidden you all beings?" (70). He said, "These are my daughters if you would be doing" (71). By your life, they wandered blindly in their dazzlement (72), and the Cry seized them at sunrise (73), and We turned it upside down and rained on it stones of baked clay (74).

The narrative of Lot in *sūrat al-Ḥijr* is the first recounting of the story in the cause of Qur'ānic proclamation to explicitly describe Lot's endeavor to safeguard his guests. The previous accounts focus predominantly on the punishment and destruction of the people of Lot and on Lot's role in warning them; his struggle to protect his guests is not at the core (see Q 51:31–37, 54:33–39, 37:133–138, 26:160–175). The narrative in Q 15 may also be approached in terms of divine punishment, though no less important is the protection of strangers as the story's focal point.

Lot welcomes the messengers by calling them "strangers" (Q 15:62 "Surely you are strangers!" *innakum qawmun munkarūn*), repeating the words of Abraham in Q 51:25, who welcomed the messengers with almost identical words: *salāmun qawmun munkarūn*. This reference indicates that in both cases, the guests are the same; furthermore, it establishes a direct connection to hospitality ethics: Abraham and Lot invite strangers into their homes without hesitation and place them under their care and protection.

The description of the joyful arrival of the city dwellers (Q 15:67) and Lot's reaction to their coming (Q 15:68–69) display two opposite emotions: "The people of the city came rejoicing. He said, 'These are my guests; do not disgrace me. Fear God, and do not shame me!'" (*wa-jā'a ahlu l-madīnati yastabshirūn / qāla inna hā'ulā'i ḍayfi fa-lā tafḍahūn / wa-ttaqu Llāha wa-lā tukhẓūn*). Whereas in the story of Abraham, the guests break the rules of hospitality, in this story,

the norms of hospitality and the honor of the host are threatened by the people of the city (Hoffmann 2002, 450). The reversal of the situation also includes the message: The divine envoys do not bring glad tidings but announce destruction, Q 15:63–64: “They said, ‘We have brought you what they were doubting (63). We have come to you with the truth, and we speak truly’” (64). This statement refers to the announced punishment of Lot’s people known from previous *sūras*; it also contains a reference to the polemical objection directed against the Qur’ānic messenger in the first part of *sūrat al-Ḥijr*, Q 15:7: “Why are you not bringing us the angels, if you are speaking truly?” The opponents ask for graspable evidence for the divine legitimacy of the Qur’ānic proclamation and its messenger. Still, their demand is rejected by pointing out that angels follow divine commands, not human requests.

Whereas the opponents of the Prophet asked him to bring down angels from the heavens, if he is indeed telling the truth, here, indeed, the guests turn out to be angels of destruction. Thus, the announcement is set as an inverse symmetry to the current situation. The contrast between the announcement of their destruction and the description of the thrilled city dwellers cannot be clearer. They come expecting some joyous event, which creates an ironic reversal: Whereas Abraham was promised unexpected glad tidings, the city’s inhabitants expect some bliss but find their downfall.

Lot’s plea to honor the social values of hospitality is remarkable concerning his explicit defense of his guests, who are exposed to an unknown danger, Q 15:68–69: “He said: These are my guests, do not dishonor me. Fear God, and do not shame me.” Lot is asking the people to respect the rules of hosting and hospitality. Any violation of these values, which include the protection of the guests, amounts to a violation of a generally agreed social norm. Reading the verse in its immediate context, the reproach does not refer to any sexual preference of the inhabitants (see Genesis 19:4–5), nor their denial of punishment, but to the rights and duties of guests and hosts. Lot does not merely refer to the values of hospitality and asks for respect; he is also commending the fear of God. Thus, the values of hospitality appear as divinely sanctioned, and hospitality in itself is presented as a sacred value. It seemingly contradicts the previous observation in the story of Abraham, which suggested the possibility of a divine decline of the rules of hospitality. However, removing social ties and norms, which hamper the relationship between God and human beings, does not conflict with norms that guarantee a peaceful co-existence and respects the rights of strangers.

On the contrary, the description of divine hospitality offered to the believers in paradise defines and sets the rules for welcoming and protecting guests. Lot obviously overrules a demand of the people, who do not allow him to practice

hospitality and generosity towards strangers (Q 15:70). He goes as far as offering his daughters as a sacrifice to keep the sacred value of hospitality. Neither the Qurʾān nor the biblical or other post-biblical texts reveal the fate of the daughters, but the common interpretation concludes that divine intervention preserved them from any harm (Kugel 1997, 182–183). From our point of view, offering innocent and pure girls for probable abuse is outrageous, given their presumable fate. Assessed from a different perspective, Lot offers his most precious rather than abandoning his guests. His action and his readiness to sacrifice his children for the sake of the divine demand of hospitality is comparable, to some extent, to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son upon divine commandment (Q 37:102–103).

3.4 *Qurʾānic Hospitality in a Historical Context*

It is a well-known fact that hospitality was considered a fundamental ethical virtue in pre-Islamic Arabia (Izutsu 2002, 75–82; Mañşūr 2006; Siddiqui 2015, 48–50); in Rabbinic literature, showing hospitality to wayfarers amounts to an ethical obligation, and legal leniency is prescribed by the Rabbis to facilitate hospitality at any given time (Gardener 2015, 99–108). Furthermore, early Christian hospitality practices have led to the establishment of institutionalized forms of hosting strangers (Oden 2010). Jewish and Christian attitudes towards hospitality are based on narratives—such as the exempla of Abraham and Lot (Genesis 18–9)—and further hinge on teachings from the Hebrew Bible and, in the case of Christian traditions, also from the New Testament.

The Qurʾānic approach to hospitality, hence, engages with these existing notions, criticizing, adapting, or modifying them. Mona Siddiqui's groundbreaking study on the concept of hospitality in the Qurʾān and Islamic teachings—alongside Jewish, Christian, and modern philosophical notions—offers a very thoughtful examination of the ethics and ethos of hospitality (Siddiqui 2015). She convincingly argues that the Qurʾān does not directly present a concept of hospitality; instead, it addresses several aspects of hospitality and charity, which evolve into the all-embracing importance of charity, which encompasses the notion of hospitality. Her line of argumentation can be refined by including the conclusions drawn from analyzing narratives in their literary and historical contexts.

The way Jewish and Christian literature draws on the figures of Abraham and Lot as examples of righteous behaving sets a template for the Qurʾānic presentation of both virtues that foster the establishment of ethical principles (Alexander 1985, 289–291). I also wish to argue that Qurʾānic narratives are a prerequisite for Qurʾānic legal biddings and regulations (Yaran 2007, 43). The regulations are established upon dismissing a self-centered generosity

expressed in pre-Islamic Arabic poems. The Qur'ānic criticism of unlimited and ruinous generosity, especially in very early *sūras*, has already been pointed out by several scholars (for instance, Izutsu 2002, 75–82; Imhof 2004, 289–294). While the host—as described in Pre-Islamic poems—seeks to establish a long-lasting reputation and the immortality of his name by offering a meal that might ruin him and his family, Qur'ānic directives deplore such egocentric aim. Generous deeds are instead considered a grateful response to God's mercy towards humanity. Hospitality should be centered on God, whose name will be praised when receiving guests, giving alms, or feeding the needy (see Q 2:177). Generosity and hospitality are ethical values that shall not be abused to propagate one's reputation and gain immortality on earth.

3.5 *God as Host*

God is never explicitly described in the Qur'ān as host, which does not imply, however, that the concept of divine hospitality or the notion of God as host is absent. On the contrary, to identify certain aspects of the Qur'ānic image of God more precisely, the notion of hospitality as a conceptual key is particularly valuable. Siddiqui already underlined God's role as a generous provider of sustenance (Siddiqui 2015, 123–124). This attribution cannot be overestimated for its ubiquity in the Qur'ān. *Sūrat al-Ḥijr* includes, in its first part, a particularly remarkable affirmation of God's power to provide. The verses combine the presentation of God's creational power and divine abundance with the representation of human life in this world as a temporal state:

And the earth—We stretched it forth, and cast on it firm mountains, and We caused to grow therein of everything in due balance (19). We have provided sustenance in it for you and those you do not provide for (20). There is not a thing whose storehouses are not with Us, and We don't send it but in a known measure (21). We send the winds to fertilize, and We send down out of heaven water, then We give it to you to drink, and you are not its treasurers (22). It is We who give life and make to die, and it is We who are the inheritors (23). We know the ones of you who come first, and We know those who come later (24); and it is your Lord who will gather them, He is All-wise, All-knowing (25).

God's abundant provision is not limited to human beings; he supplies the needs of all his creatures.

In the end, however, God will be the heir, regaining everything that he has entrusted with and given to humanity. The image of human beings as guests in God's created world, the notion of life as a transient state, and the idea of

God who hosts human beings in this temporal and eternal world are almost inevitably inculcated. One of the core Qur'ānic messages is the eschatological determination of human life. Human existence does not end with death but is oriented towards eternal life; the image of God as host in this world is, thus, intrinsically connected with his image as host in the afterlife, inviting for a paradisiac banquet, which will include and excel all imaginable pleasures of an earthly meal. The believers will be invited to a sumptuous feast hosted by God. Such a divine banquet embodies the idea of feasting and drinking after a victory hosted by the king for his devoted faithful and followers.⁷

Thus, God is conceptualized as a gracious host and almighty ruler. This notion reflects Judeo-Christian traditions that intensely present God as a gracious host (Arterbury 2005, 91). One of the most prominent biblical points of reference is Psalm 23:5–6: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

The Psalm connects God's image as a food provider with the notion of protection; as a gracious host, he also shields from the enemies (Arterbury and Bellinger 2005, 391). This notion is also evident in the earliest *sūras*, for instance, in Q 106:4: “[The Lord of the house] who has fed them against hunger and secured them from fear.” God provides food and protection in both worlds—this and the world to come. The description of paradisiac life in Q 15 is, hence, concerned with the aspect of protection and security and should be assumed as a complimentary aspect to the descriptions of paradise, which focus on eternal provision. Provision and protection feature as two sides of the same coin.

The notion of God as host also allows for a short reconsideration of the later Medinan account of Jesus, who asks God to supply a table from heaven upon the request of his disciples, Q 5:112–116:

And when the disciples said, “O Jesus son of Mary, is thy Lord able to send down on us a Table out of heaven?” He said, “Fear you, God, if you are believers” (112). They said, “We desire that we should eat of it and our hearts be at rest; and that we may know that thou hast spoken true to us and that we may be among its witnesses” (113). Said Jesus, son of Mary, “O God, our Lord, send down upon us a Table out of heaven, that shall be for us a festival, the first and last of us, and a sign from Thee. And provide for us; Thou art the best of providers” (114). God said, “Verily I do send it

7 On the entire subject matter of the banquet in Rabbinic and Early Christian theology, see Smith 1992; Long 2013. For the Qur'ān, see Neuwirth 2019, 259–264.

down on you; whoso of you hereafter disbelieves, verily I shall chastise him with a chastisement wherewith I chastise no other being" (115).

Several considerations regarding the connection to biblical texts or Christian traditions are prevalent among scholars, such as an allusion to Psalm 78:19 in the Ethiopian version (Reynolds 2012), several late antique traditions of a promised festival from heaven, and, most prominently, a reference to John 6:27–51 (Zellentin in Azaiez et al. 2016, 116–117).⁸ In both texts, the disciples are supplied food from heaven, with the significant difference that the explication in the Gospel of John culminates in the statement that Jesus himself is the heavenly food and, thus, the object of belief, whereas in the Qur'ān, Jesus is a mediator between his disciples and God and the miraculous food is a divine sign which leads to the faith in God.

Moreover, the Qur'ānic account amounts to a negation of the Christian idea of Jesus' role as host, not only as a feeder of the crowds, as providing and instantiating the bread of life, but also as the originator of the Last Supper (Ernst 2011, 197). The Qur'ānic verses may, hence, also prompt a reinterpretation of this major event that is liturgically reenacted in the Eucharist by depriving Jesus of any igniting power and, instead, presenting a happening that is solely focused on God's ability to provide sustenance (Kuschel 2013, 131–147). Such kind of inverted intertextuality takes up the interpretative potential of the Christian tradition, which reassesses it.

The Qur'ānic verses diminish Jesus' role and de-allegorize the meal, presenting it as a sign of God's mercy and power. God alone is preparing the table, its food, and it is up to him to choose those who shall partake in the table fellowship; Jesus has no such power.⁹ The Qur'ān's shift comprises an anti-Christological statement and a clear response to Christian tradition.

3.6 *Human Beings as Hosts*

Human hospitality in the Qur'ān is presented as an *imitatio dei*. God is presented as a provider, protector, and ultimate host; thus, it is a virtue and duty to imitate divine hospitality. Providing food and protecting the guests amount, hence, to the quintessence of hospitality, which corresponds to the concepts in

8 John 6:32–35: (32) Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. (33) For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." (34) They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." (35) Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."

9 For the reinterpretation and deallegorization of the Last Supper, see also the study of the interconnection between the Qur'ānic text and visual images of the Last Supper, in Radscheit 2003, 172–173.

pre-Islamic cultures of the Arabian peninsula, and in Jewish or Christian communities in Late Antiquity. It was never a mere matter of entertaining one's neighbors to dinner or having a table fellowship; it was essentially the provision of food and extending protection to wayfarers. The distinction between the concepts of hospitality is, thus, rather based upon the reason and purpose of welcoming wayfarers.

The biblical customs of welcoming the exhausted traveler and receiving the stranger in one's midst was the matrix out of which hospitality, in all its aspects, developed into a highly esteemed virtue in Jewish tradition. Biblical law specifically sanctified hospitality toward the stranger, for the Israelites had been foreigners in a strange land, Leviticus 19:34: "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Though unprotected by law, strangers could rely on the custom of hospitality, which would protect them (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 15:3). The most prominent figures to embody the pious virtue of hospitality are Abraham and Lot, although the Hebrew Bible is fraught with other examples (Stein 1982, 105–106). Rabbinic literature amplified the scope of the virtue of hospitality, especially extending it to the care for the poor and placing it above the importance of prayer (Borowitz and Weinman Schwartz 1999, 91).

Likewise, the Christian practice of hospitality is based on the examples of Abraham and Lot and, furthermore, on references from the New Testament stating the importance of being generous and hospitable to the traveler, the poor, and the sick. Of primary importance is the statement of Jesus: "He who receives you, receives me, and he who receives me receives who sent me ..." (Matthew 10, 40–42).¹⁰ The awareness and expectation of hosting their Lord by receiving guests was a primary cause of the early Christian virtue of hospitality, which gradually evolved into an institutionalized habit (Riddle 1938; Arterbury 2005). Hospitality for migrating and traveling fellow Christians—such as missionaries, pilgrims, or migrants—was of utmost significance for the

10 Of similar importance is the pronouncement of eschatological proceedings on the Day of Judgment, Matthew 25:34–40:

³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, saying, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

Early Christian communities. Thus, reading the stories of Abraham and Lot in the Qurʾān as examples of the virtue of hospitality entails the continuation of a long history of interpreting the biblical narratives and re-assessing the welcoming of strangers as sacred law. The narratives are a supplement and prerequisite of commands, which demand care for the wayfarer (see Q 2:177, 2:215, 9:60, 17:26, 30:38, 59:7).

In the “Qurʾānic Decalogue” in *sūrat al-Isrāʾ* (Q 17:22–39), the following commandment is stated Q 17:26–27: “And give the kinsman his right, and the needy, and the traveler; and never squander (26); the squanderers are brothers of Satan, and Satan is unthankful to his Lord” (27). The set of commandments in Q 17 reflects the polarization between the emerging religious community and its pagan opponents. It presents ethical declarations and, likewise, polemicizes against false priorities and wrong behavior and, consequently, demands their amendment (Neuwirth 2017b, 163). In the case of hospitality and generosity, the verses issue a warning against squandering and wastefulness, which is considered evil-rooted.

A list of commandments in *sūrat al-Rūm* (Q 30) reflects, even more vehemently, the Qurʾānic worldview, which presents God as the initial provider of life and sustenance and demands the caring for the needy and the traveler as a religious duty, a pious deed and a response to God’s care, Q 30:37–38:

Have they not seen that God outspreads and straitens His provision to whom He will? Surely in that are signs for people who believe (37). And give the kinsman his right, and the needy, and the traveler; that is better for those who desire God’s Face; those they are the prosperers (38).

Hospitality is presented as a right and a duty, but above all, it is a virtue constituting the counterpart of divine action. The foundation of hospitality is rooted in divine-human communication and the divine promise of providence and protection for his creatures. God’s action demands a reciprocal response among human beings. Thus, the roots of Qurʾānic hospitality do not stem from the experience of being a stranger, as stressed in Jewish tradition. Neither do they consist in the hope and expectation of hosting God himself, as in Christian belief. Hospitality, in the Qurʾān, is the answer to divine compassion and its replication among human beings.

4 Concluding Remarks

This chronological and contextual analysis has shown that examining narratives in relation to non-narrative parts within a historical context reveals their

inseparable entanglement. In the quest for ethics of hospitality, the Qurʾān offers more than plain exhortations or simple directives. The interplay of narratives, description, and imperatives; the critique of pre-Qurʾānic concepts of hosting; the modification of biblical and postbiblical traditions enables the recognition of the complexity and fluidity of the Qurʾānic concept of God and man and their involvement in the establishment of virtues and ethics. The Qurʾānic revelation began by reminding the audience of God's bounties before turning to human virtues. From the earliest *sūras* onwards, an image of God is established, which attributes compassion and mercy as primary constituents of His being in relation to humanity. Life in the light of God's care and mercy, thus, means showing compassion and mercy for others. The Qurʾān never restricts hospitality to fellow believers but extends the right of hospitality as an essential prerogative of the non-specified wayfarer. Inhospitability is the moral turpitude of a community, as in the case of Lot's people, while felicitous hospitality, such as Abraham's, might generate life-changing events.

Virtues within narratives and non-narrative sections are presented as traits that yield good consequences for those who reliably fulfill their duties. I argue that the Qurʾān endorses approaches that go beyond the deontological notion that ethical behavior consists of the performance of duties and the adherence to rules, which emphasize the consequences of any action. The Qurʾān propounds a "virtue ethics": Ethical behavior is presented as a fundamental component of human existence; in its essence, it is the imitation or reflection of the divine and, as such, lies at the core of each individual (Hursthouse 2018).

Islamic tradition established the norm of hospitality, *wājib al-ḍiyāfa*, as the main constituent of Islamic ethics and as part of *adab*, referring mainly to a plethora of prophetic traditions that emphasize the necessity of hospitality and set rules for its extent and range. Examining their connection and intertwinement with the Qurʾānic narratives and commandments will offer further insight into the development of Islamic ethics and their elaboration in theological, legal, or entertaining texts, as well as their implementation in everyday life. Qurʾānic notions and Islamic traditions might also refine our perception of the Islamic material past.

The residence of al-Sitt Tunshuq does not merely present the Qurʾānic verses as an exhibition of engraved piety; its architecture also reflects the ethics of Qurʾānic and Islamic hospitality, offering halls on two floors and several recreational places. Located on the opposite side, al-Sitt Tunshuq's tomb (*turba*) faces the main gates of her residence (fig. 3.3). Two windows set at pedestrian height invite a glance inside and enable the audibility of Qurʾānic recitation beside the tomb, which, traditionally, was regularly organized. Furthermore,



FIGURE 3.3 West gate, door, and benches, picture: *private*

stone benches are allocated at the tomb's entrance and the palace's western and eastern gates (fig. 3.4). The Islamic virtue of hospitality, hence, extends beyond death and across the walls, inviting those who pass by to sit and linger, to receive blessings by reading and listening to the Qur'ān, reflecting the promised divine hospitality, Q 15:46: "Enter them, in peace and security."



FIGURE 3.4 Turbat al-Sitt Tunshuq, open windows facing the street, benches beside the door, picture: *private*

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Appendix 1

Outline of Structure and Content of *Sūrat al-Ḥijr*

1–25 Polemics and Affirmation of the Qur’anic Revelation

- 1 Disconnected Letters (*alif lām rā*) and the affirmation of the Qur’anic revelation
- 2–5 Threat of destruction of the disbelievers at a set time
- 6–9 Objections of the opponents (the messenger being a madman and demand of bringing an angel) and refutation (angels come only with assigned tasks)
- 10–15 Evocation of past events and polemics (destruction of former people, uselessness of showing evidence)
- 16–25 Affirmation of God’s sole power to create and sustain all creation

26–48 Creation of the Human (*Insān*) and the Story of Iblis

- 26–27 God’s creation of the human and *jinn*
- 28–42 Iblis debates with God
- 43–44 Description of hell
- 45–48 Description of paradise and divine hospitality

49–84 Narratives of Mercy, Punishment, and Hospitality

- 49–50 Headline: God is forgiving and merciful, warning of punishment
- 51–56 Narrative of mercy and hospitality (Abraham)

- 57–60 Narrative of punishment (Abraham and Lot)
- 61–77 Narrative of mercy, punishment, and hospitality (Lot)
- 75–77 Affirmation of ruins as divine signs (*āyāt*)
- 78–79 Evocation of past punishment (*aṣḥāb al-ayka*)
- 80–84 Evocation of past punishment (*aṣḥāb al-Hijr*)

85–99 Affirmation of the Qurʾānic Message and Addresses of the Qurʾānic Messenger

- 85–86 Affirmation of God's power of creation and knowledge of the end of the world
- 87–99 Address of the messenger (affirmation of revelation, call for steadfastness, and call for devotion)

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Sacrifice, Liberalism and the Qur'ān's Revisionist Reading of the *Akeda*

An Islamic Contribution to the Political Theology of Democracy

Mohammad Fadel

1 Liberalism and Political Theology

More than thirty years have passed since the publication of Francis Fukuyama's article, *The End of History*, in which he argued that the end of the Cold War meant that humanity would universally adopt liberalism as its organizing political ideal (Fukuyama 1989). Over the last twenty years, however, a series of cataclysmic shocks have shaken the roots of the liberal order, causing many to question its continued viability. The cataclysmic events of 9/11, the US invasion of Iraq and the massive destruction it unleashed in its wake, Brexit, and the rise of nationalist (or even fascist) parties in Europe in response to the mass migration of Muslim refugees and other peoples from the global south, the possible dissolution of the European Union, the 2016 election of Trump and the 6 January 2021 insurrection led by his supporters in an attempt to keep him in power despite his election loss to Joe Biden, have called into question whether liberalism itself can endure in the face of what appears to be widespread disenchantment with its ideals. Fukuyama himself even seems to have lost faith: instead of reason leading to the universal adoption of liberalism, identity politics has reasserted itself, or so it seems, as the central political question of our time (Menand 2018).

Some critics of liberalism blame the return of identity politics on liberalism itself: liberalism's attempts to deny, even suppress, the politics of the passions, and replace them with technocratic calculations, only guarantee the violent return of identity politics. If it is impossible to repress the particular (identity) in the name of the universal (reason), one might rightly question whether liberal politics can be sustained in the long term. One strand of political theorizing that seeks to explore the tension between the particular and the universal in politics is known as *political theology*, in deference to Carl Schmitt's (d. 1985) famous claim that "All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Schmitt 2005). Paul Kahn (b. 1952), acting on Schmitt's insight regarding the displaced theological doctrines that

undergird modern states, seeks to explore the tension between the universal rationalism liberalism promises with the particularistic, theologically-inflected character of politics in the United States in his 2011 work, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Kahn 2011).

For Kahn, the idea of “political theology” is not a return to the notion that politics is a branch of theology or that a religious ideal should control politics; rather, it is the idea that politics remains a domain of the sacred and unless citizens recognize the sacred in their politics, the political order will not be able to sustain itself. Political theology seeks to understand how the sacred manifests itself in a polity by considering the polity's founding myths and those practices and stories that function as sources of the sacred in its political life and allow it to sustain itself over time. In short, the normative political theory of the state articulated by liberal political philosophers is incomplete without a phenomenological one. Kahn calls this perspective on politics *political theology* because it reveals how political language draws on the sacred language of theology to sustain itself.

2 Sovereignty and Sacrifice in the Political

Because Kahn agrees with Schmitt that liberal political theory is incomplete, Kahn argues that it is the exceptional moments of the political that tell us the most about a polity, not its ordinary practices (Schmitt 2005, 15).¹ One of the most important exceptional moments in political life is that of sacrifice and what it tells us about the nature of the sovereign exception and revelation. But these ideas cannot be understood except through the lens of particular stories, and for Kahn, this demands reflection on the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac, known as the *Akeda* (or “the Binding”) in Hebrew (Kahn 2011, 157).

While liberalism posits that the origin of political society lies in a social contract calculated to secure the rational advantage of all contracting parties, political theology emphasizes the freedom of the sovereign will as the constitutive feature of the political, and identifies the origin of political sovereignty in the act of, or the willingness to, sacrifice. Thus, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac in Kahn's analysis is paradigmatic of the sovereign origins

1 “The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception.”

of the political, an act which, although outside the norms of legality, finds its legitimacy as a manifestation of the sacred.

The sovereign prerogative of exception, however, is neither arbitrary nor lawless: it is an exception that affirms the norm. Kahn describes it as a will that seeks to overcome its own exceptional nature by re-establishing the ordinary norms of existence.

God's command to Abraham in Genesis to sacrifice his son Isaac reveals the relationship of the exception/sacred to the norm/reason in the domain of the political: although God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is arbitrary, even cruel, it is not murder. Nor is Abraham's response to the command the act of a slave. Rather, it is a free act on the part of Abraham that is productive: it is through his willingness to perform the sacrifice that he gives life to Israel, as a people. It is thus the exception that grounds the norm: the exceptional sacrifice of his son brings the norm into existence (no sacrifice = no Israel), and without existence (the people of Israel), there can be no society ordered by law. The sovereign will, therefore, both enables the exception to the norm and enables the norm's operation by creating the circumstances where the ordinary, rational norms of legality can operate.

In Kahn's account, the sovereign will is not reducible to reason: it is an act of faith that implicitly entails the possibility of death and thus sacrifice. In the case of a democratic sovereign will, one might say with Kahn that it acts exceptionally to enable the conditions for democratic rationality—understood as the operation of the rule of law—to become effective. From this perspective, political theology acts as the decisive link that unites sovereign will (command) and democratic reason (judgment) by recognizing that reason's demand for a polity governed by the rule of law can only be achieved through the decision to act based on sacrificial faith to bring about the existence of a rule-of-law based, democratic polity.

3 Liberalism and the Sacred

The liberal political philosopher John Rawls (d. 2002) exemplifies Kahn's criticism of liberalism.² He argues that Rawls manages to suppress the tension between will and reason (or the exception and the norm) through the veil of ignorance. But Kahn suggests that this is a sleight of hand that is too clever by one half: the veil of ignorance is designed to eliminate the possibility of a *particular* will; its very structure eliminates the need for a sovereign decision

2 This chapter will make occasional reference to various works of Rawls 1996; 1997; 1971.

because all particular wills are reduced to one will. By stripping individuals who are behind the veil of ignorance of their historically contingent identities, the exercise renders sacrifice inconceivable. While the heuristic of the veil of ignorance might be relevant to understanding how reason demands democratic practice ought to operate, it can tell us nothing about the will necessary to bring about the existence of what Rawls calls the “well-ordered society.” To put it differently, the theoretical exercise that Rawls uses to articulate the rules of a just society is not only incomplete because it does not give a serious account of how such a society could exist, but it also must fail because it excludes sacrificial faith from politics.

Is Kahn correct, however, when he argues that liberalism, with its reliance on reason, lacks space for the sacred? Rawls can certainly be read as *assuming* a certain kind of sacrality to the political insofar as his diagnosis of the rise of Nazism in Weimar Germany was not primarily the result of unfortunate economic circumstances, but rather due to the loss of *hope* on the part of politically active German citizens in the possibility of a reasonably just democratic society (Rawls 1996, lxi–lxii). To the extent that Rawls' arguments seek to strengthen our will to establish and maintain just institutions over time, they too can be viewed as secularized theological arguments.

Accordingly, the central problem Rawls tries to resolve in *Political Liberalism* is not whether reason can determine for us the content of justice, but whether we have the capacity to produce just institutions, and if we do, whether we can maintain them over time. Rawls' focus on whether just institutions can be maintained “for the right reasons” over time takes us from behind the veil of ignorance and reintroduces the problem of individual free will. It makes the will of free citizens, acting in history, indispensable for the maintenance of just institutions over time. To that extent, Rawls' version of political liberalism seems to require for its stability the capacity of citizens to cultivate a sense of the sacred so that they maintain their commitment to sustain just institutions over time.

That liberals do not ordinarily articulate expressly a political theology does not mean that they are incapable of recognizing the sacred in democratic politics. Liberals might take the view that, just as a well-ordered society is characterized by a multiplicity of reasonable, but incompatible, comprehensive doctrines, so too a well-ordered society is characterized by a multiplicity of political theologies that attempt to recognize the sacred in the political and that this “reasonable pluralism” in the domain of political theology in turn calls for restraint in articulating any claims about a universal political theology for a democratic polity. But it is clear that democratic politics cannot be sustained without the *faith* of the citizenry that its procedures are often frustrating

compromises will produce acceptably just outcomes more often than not and that as time progresses, society will gradually approach what justice demands.

4 A Liberal Critique of Kahn's Theory of the Sacrifice and the Political

Kahn is at pains to distinguish between a commitment to the sacral, non-rational origins of the democratic state, and the rational order of day-to-day democratic politics. He argues that there is no necessary relationship between the existential and sacred foundation of the political, on the one hand, and the kind of politics an individual (or presumably a people) adopts, on the other (Kahn 2011, 25). In other words, one might reject normative liberal political theory as the foundation of the state, but still accept it as representing the best guide to practical politics. This is because Kahn asserts that will precedes judgment, the former constituting the latter, but not vice-versa.

He admits that his argument means that politics, however, will always be "dangerous." (Kahn 2011, 25) He does not dwell as much as he perhaps should on why this renders politics "dangerous." The answer, I believe, lies in the theological counterparts to the positive theological concepts he deploys, and their secularized analogues. While Kahn emphasizes the theologically *positive* idea of the miracle, he avoids explicit discussion of its *diabolical* opposite, sorcery. The same can be said about other secularized theological concepts that he appropriates, such as sacrifice and revelation, without warning us of their counterfeits: idolatrous offerings, and demonic whispering. An adequate political theology, however, must attend not only to the sacred, but also to the diabolical.

In secularized terms, if we hope to maintain a democratic polity, we must successfully distinguish between the democratic sovereign's exceptional appearance and the diabolical lawlessness of a grasping plutocrat, *worthy* sacrifice from wanton killing, and exceptional but legitimate law-making in a crisis, from abuse of power. Indeed, it would seem that it would be impossible to sustain democratic politics unless the people have the capacity to distinguish between the sacred and the diabolical. Kahn, at least in *Political Theology*, however, is silent about this implied feature of political theology, whether from the perspective of the regularly experienced features of democratic life, or from the perspective of the psychological resources available to individual citizens that might enable them to distinguish sovereign exceptions from demonic lawlessness.

Instead, Kahn suggests that in the face of the exception, the democratic citizen, much like Abraham before the God of the Hebrew Bible, is left with little more than “Here am I” (Kahn 2011, 155). But this is not consistent with the observed experience of democratic reaction to the assertion of the exception: some citizens will certainly challenge the exception, identifying it with the diabolical, and thus resist it. The secularized analog to resisting the demonic will is civil disobedience and conscientious refusal: in this case, it falls on the individual citizen to manifest the sovereign exception by refusing to submit to a diabolic command: by excepting himself or herself from the rule of law, the individual citizen affirms it (Rawls 1971, §§ 55–59).

What this suggests is that the assertion of the exception compels individual citizens to engage first in a mandatory act of interpretation. Each individual determines whether the asserted “exception” is associated with the sovereign/sacred, or the lawless/diabolical. The unavoidability of interpreting the “exception,” therefore, implies that individuals have the capacity to do so, but it is not clear in Kahn’s account of the exception and its role in constituting democratic sovereignty where or how that capacity arises.³ While Rawls does not give a particular account explaining how individuals could make such distinctions, it is apparent that his faith in our capacity for “reasonableness” provides grounds explaining why citizens can distinguish between true and counterfeit appeals to the sovereign exception, even if the grounds for the citizens’ reasonableness may radically differ. The disjuncture in Kahn’s account between the exceptional nature of the sovereign will and the rational, rule-based order of the everyday in turn implies a radical instability to democratic life, with citizens lacking the internal resources that would allow them to distinguish between a genuinely democratic, though exceptional exercise of will, and a lawless one. Given this disjuncture, only the raw fact of power can distinguish between the contending claims.

But beyond casting doubt on our capacity to sustain a reasonably democratic order against authoritarians who counterfeit their claims to democracy, Kahn’s conception of the exception—with its religious references to the sacrificial and miraculous—also invokes a particular notion of covenantal sacrifice that is deeply connected to the biblical notion of the chosenness of Israel that

3 Kahn is aware of this dilemma. He writes, “The problem for theory ... is to understand the intersection of reason and will in a way that is adequate to each. To articulate this middle path is the largest problem for legal theory today” (Kahn 2011, 78).

results from Abraham's sacrifice (or near sacrifice) of Isaac.⁴ The covenantal community's chosenness in turn is reproduced by the father's continued willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, and the beloved son being ever ready to embrace that sacrifice. In this conception of sacrifice, sacrifice, and martyrdom become indistinguishable.

The sovereign will, moreover, now identified with the particular, chosen community is dangerously authoritarian. It mimics the

rule of the Davidic king enthroned upon Mount Zion[,] ... a manifestation of the universal dominion of the God of Israel. The former issues from the latter like the son from the father who begot him, and for those who refuse to "listen to him," as the story of the Transfiguration puts it in reference to the beloved son, this has catastrophic consequences.

LEVENSON 1993, 204

We are now in a better position to appreciate the "dangerous" nature of politics that Kahn's political theology reveals. First, there is the risk that at any moment in time, the democratic project will be abandoned for an authoritarian leader who deceives the people into believing he is a genuine messiah when he is not. Second, there is a risk that the particular nature of the covenantal sacrifice that creates the state produces a blood-and-soil ethnocracy rather than an inclusive democratic sovereignty, intolerant of difference domestically, and lawless internationally. Such a political theology hardly seems compatible with a sovereign will that is productive of a domestic order that is democratic and subject to the rule of law.

The other model of sacrifice that Kahn references, Christ's sacrifice, in which Christ replaces Isaac, and God the Father replaces, Abraham, produces a different dilemma (Kahn 2011, 21). Insofar as Christ's sacrifice is a pure act of altruism,⁵ it shares with the *Akeda* the destruction of the particular in favor of the universal, but instead of producing a political community, it points in

4 Although Genesis does not suggest that Abraham went through with the sacrifice of Isaac, important strands of Jewish commentary on the *Akeda* suggest that Abraham did indeed carry out the sacrifice, with Isaac's willing participation. In these interpretations of the *Akeda*, God then miraculously resurrects Isaac as a reward for his free embrace of God's demand that he be sacrificed, and through his free act of martyrdom, Isaac also redeems all his future descendants. See Levenson 1993, 192 describing how the biblical story of the *Akeda* in Genesis 22 was transformed from one in which the father was explicitly told not "to do anything" to his beloved son into one in which he wounds or even kills the lad."

5 Kahn describes Christ's sacrifice as "the realization of universal justice in his singular act of sacrifice" (Kahn 2011).

the opposite direction: Because Christ's sacrifice fully redeems us from our sins—we are freed of earthly ends worthy of pursuit, and thus do not need the political. If the Hebrew Bible's notion of sacrifice, and the covenant it entails, might, on Kahn's reading, lead to a chauvinistic conception of the state, the New Testament's ideal responds by establishing a covenant of pure altruism. Such a covenant, however, renders politics superfluous by eliminating the need to mediate between and among conflicting individual ends.⁶

Both interpretations of sacrifice, however, share a concept of the political that sacralizes the father-son relationship, and demands the father's sacrifice of his beloved son, his most beloved possession, as the ultimate act of propitiation or devotion in exchange for redemption (Levenson 1993, 223). The primary dispute in these two interpretations is not over the potency of such a paternal sacrifice, but in the identity of the chosen son, Isaac and his progeny—the Israelites—or Christ and his progeny—the Church—and the nature of the resulting covenant: chosenness, or the end of the political (Levenson 1993, 217).

From a Rawlsian perspective, one might interpret each of these interpretations of the *Akeda*, and the covenant each produces, as representing only one aspect of a well-ordered society: the sacrifice of Isaac produces a political covenant of the rational, but one which, if taken to its logical conclusion, justifies reducing the political to the exclusive pursuit of the good of the state, while the sacrifice of Christ produces a political covenant of the reasonable, which, taken to its extreme, eliminates the need for politics because it produces citizens that live only for the ends of others. Neither conception, on its own, is sufficient to sustain a democratic, well-ordered society whose citizens are necessarily both self-regarding (rational) and altruistic (reasonable).

What political liberalism demands, then, is an interpretation of sacrifice that unites the rational and the reasonable and produces a covenant that is both universal and accommodates the particular. To provide a basis for a political theology appropriate for a well-ordered society, moreover, it also must provide a theory of the exception that bridges the gap between will and reason so that citizens can distinguish between the demonic and the sacred.

5 Why Sacrifice? Why the Binding of Isaac?

At first glance, it might be surprising that sacrifice is so central to Kahn's understanding of sovereignty, and that he would reach back to the *Akeda* to

⁶ This is perhaps why Rousseau (d. 1778) expresses skepticism toward the possibility of a Christian republic in *The Social Contract*.

understand the relationship between the two. It becomes less mysterious, however, when the ubiquity and the centrality of the father's sacrifice of his child, usually his beloved son, in the religious imagination of Antiquity in the Near East and Mediterranean region is taken into account. The Hebrew Bible's story of the *Akeda* is but one example of a recurring theme in ancient religion. No one should forget that the central story of Christianity is based on precisely this motif: God the Father sacrifices his beloved son, Jesus, to save the world (Levenson 1993, 220). The *Akeda*, furthermore, has also played an important role in Western political and moral thought, with Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac occasioning important philosophical reflections by influential philosophers such as Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) (Kant 1979, 115) and Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855) (Kierkegaard 2013).

The theme of the father's sacrifice of the beloved son or daughter, and its potency to appease the gods, is also a familiar part of the repertoire of the pagan religions of antiquity. The *Iliad* tells the story of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia as part of a successful effort to appease the goddess Artemis so that she would send a favorable breeze allowing the Greek ships to set off against Troy (Homer 2015). The pre-Islamic Arabs also seemed to have shared in the widespread belief in the potency of a father's sacrifice of a son. The most famous pre-Islamic Arabian example of this belief is the story of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib (d. 45 before Hijra/579), the paternal grandfather of the Prophet Muḥammad, who vowed (*nadhara*) that if God were to give him ten sons, he would sacrifice one of them. When he was indeed given ten sons, he drew lots to determine which of them to sacrifice. He drew the name of his youngest and most beloved son, 'Abd Allāh (d. 54 before Hijra/570), who would be the father of the Prophet Muḥammad, but 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib was able to ransom his beloved son by instead offering a sacrifice of 100 camels (Ibn Hishām 1990, 1:174).⁷ The Qur'ān itself gives a nod to the hold that child sacrifice held over popular religious imagination of the Near East in al-An'ām, Q 6:137, where it accuses the polytheistic gods of having "adorned" for the polytheists the murder of their own children.

The Christian understanding of Christ's death as a case of the father (God), who willingly sacrifices his beloved first-born son (Jesus) to save humanity, is perhaps the most enduring example of the potency of the idea of the

7 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's vow was motivated by the desire to secure his clan's position within the tribe of Quraysh after 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib rediscovered the well of Zamzam. After a dream disclosed to him its location, and he successfully uncovered the well, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib nearly lost his discovery to the other clans of Quraysh because he lacked sufficient sons to stand with him to defend his claim to the well.

father-beloved son sacrifice. But developments in Late Antique Judaism in the centuries prior to the second Temple's destruction had already reinterpreted the *Akeda* so that instead of God staying Abraham's hand, Abraham carried through the sacrifice of a willing Isaac, whom God then miraculously resurrected, thus establishing the link between sacrifice and martyrdom that Christianity would appropriate for Christ. The father's sacrifice of the beloved son, whether in its Late Antique Jewish or Pauline Christian guise, was also generative of an exclusive moral community, linking the physical or spiritual descendants of the sacrificed son to God, either directly in the case of Christianity, or indirectly through Abraham, in the case of Judaism (Levenson 1993, 223). All of these stories, whether in the pagan or the monotheistic context, share the common feature of the father destroying the most precious "thing" to him—his child, usually the son—in order to establish the success of the relevant community: the sacrifice of the son represents the most extraordinary exception to the norm of the father's love for his child, but the horrible act is redeemed because through it the community's welfare is secured: the Greeks avenge their honor; 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib's clan, the Banū Hāshim, are restored to their rightful place of dignity in the tribe of Quraysh, paving the way for the successful mission a generation later of the Prophet Muḥammad; Abraham establishes the special relationship between God and Isaac and his descendants; and God, by sacrificing Jesus, creates the Church as an exclusive community of salvation. Given the numerous linkages between exception, sacrifice, and sovereignty, it becomes perfectly understandable that Kahn repairs to the *Akeda* as the paradigmatic story through which we can understand the symbolic and existential dimensions of politics that in Kahn's view liberalism suppresses.

6 The "End" of Sacrifice and the Paradox of "Sacrifice" in Islam

Sacrifice in these disparate monotheistic and polytheistic traditions brings together the simultaneous reactions of horror from the sacrificant's killing of a precious object, and in the sacrifice of the beloved son—the most precious object in the sacrificant's life—along with a simultaneous recognition of the terrible act's unrivaled potency in achieving transcendence and divine favor as manifested in sovereignty. No doubt for this reason, both pagan and monotheistic religions by late antiquity had rejected in principle human sacrifice (especially child sacrifice) but continued to practice animal sacrifice as rituals central to their respective cults. By the end of the fourth century of the Common Era, even animal sacrifices, however, had increasingly fallen out of

favor. Historians of religion refer to the gradual disappearance of sacrifice from Near Eastern religion as “the end of sacrifice” (Stroumsa 2009).

Stroumsa outlined three separate trajectories in the development of late antique religion that explain “the end of sacrifice.” First, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE essentially forced Jews to abandon sacrifice because it became impossible to fulfill the Torah’s commands regarding sacrifice. Rabbinic Judaism in turn responded to this crisis by substituting prayer, charity, and other pious acts for sacrifice. Second, in Christianity, the Pauline understanding of Christ’s death as the perfect atoning sacrifice—the sacrifice that brings an end to sacrifice—rationalized the destruction of the Temple and relegated the Torah’s commandments concerning animal sacrifice to a now transcended and obsolete past. Finally, the new forms of religiosity that post-Temple Judaism and early Christianity fostered, disconnected as they were from the public spectacle of sacrifice, fostered increasing critiques of sacrifice by pagan intellectuals. This in turn contributed to a gradual retreat of sacrifice in pagan rituals as well (Stroumsa 2015, 35–36). Finally, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century CE, a series of imperial decrees sought to stamp out the practice entirely (Bradbury 1994).

Despite the public suppression of sacrifice, however, the symbolism of sacrifice continued to be central to the rituals of both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, and indeed, for the latter, the hope that sacrifice would be restored was never abandoned. The priestly hierarchy of the Church, for example, mimicked the priestly organization of the Temple (Catholic Church 1993), and the principal ritual of the Church, the Eucharist, acts as a “virtual” sacrifice. Despite the impossibility of fulfilling biblical law, and the rabbis’ substitution of other rituals in lieu of those biblically prescribed sacrifices, the detailed regulations the Mishnah provides for the performance of the sacrificial rituals of the Torah confirm the ongoing interest of post-Temple era rabbis in the rituals of sacrifice (Balberg 2017), to say nothing of the enduring significance of the theme of sacrifice in Jewish liturgy.

The appearance of Islam in the seventh century of the Common Era also disrupts the narrative of “the end of sacrifice.” Islam enshrines a regular animal sacrifice in one of its two major festivals, the Feast of the Slaughter of the Sacrificial Animals (ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā), which takes place on the tenth day of the last month of the Islamic calendar (Dhū al-Ḥijja), the month of the Pilgrimage to Mecca.⁸ This day coincides with the day (*yawm al-naḥr*) when most pilgrims will offer their own animal sacrifices. Islam also contemplates expiatory animal

8 Stroumsa notes that although Islam preserved a form of animal sacrifice, it played a role rather distinct from the role of sacrifice in “the Roman imperial religion.” He does not, however, attempt to explain what role it plays within Islamic ritual (Stroumsa 2009, 58).

sacrifices (*kaffāra*) in connection with violations of specific rules related to the sanctity of the Meccan sanctuary, and for violations of some of the restrictions applicable to the pilgrims while they are in a consecrated state (*iḥrām*). It also authorizes votive sacrifices (*nadhr*) under certain conditions.

At first glance, Islamic narratives of sacrifice appear to resemble some pre-Islamic traditions of sacrifice, but while it recounts the story of the *Akeda* with important revisions and omissions, it denies outright Christ's sacrifice. Islam also seems to transform sacrifice into a mere act of ordinary consumption, making it difficult to distinguish an animal slaughtered as a sacrifice (*ḍaḥīyya*) from one slaughtered and consumed regularly in daily life (*dhabīḥa*). This has led some historians of religion to deny that Islam has a proper conception of sacrifice at all (Henninger 2005, 7997–8008).

Islamic sacrifice therefore appears to be both an anomaly and a paradox: Why preserve sacrifice if it is hardly distinguishable from the ordinary slaughter and consumption of animals? I argue that the Qur'ān's treatment of sacrifice is fundamental to its own ethic of personal responsibility—manifested in some of the earliest verses of the Qur'ān, e.g., 53:38–39 (“None shall bear the burden of another; [and] man shall have naught but that for which he endeavored”)—and its own understanding of divine transcendence.⁹ This is manifested in its own version of the *Akeda*, its polemics against pre-Islamic conceptions of sacrifice, and its new regime of non-sacrificial “sacrifice.” Islam's reconstruction of sacrifice is emblematic of what I call Islam's “theistic humanism”: that the true end of religion is not propitiation, but human well-being and solidarity. Islam's reconstruction of sacrifice, and its revision of the *Akeda* suggest that it may have a different story to tell about the relationship of the exception and sacrifice to the political, but before we return to the topic of political theology, and what the Qur'ān's conception of sacrifice might have to say about that, we must first turn to the relevant Qur'ānic texts themselves.

7 The Qur'ān's *Akeda* Revisionism

Abraham (Ibrāhīm in Arabic) is a central figure in the Qur'ān.¹⁰ His name appears explicitly in dozens of verses throughout the text, and its fourteenth *sūra* is named after him. A central component of the Qur'ān's theology, as well

9 Translations in this chapter are those of *The Study Quran* (Nasr et al. 2015), although I may at times depart slightly from its wording. The chief advantage of *The Study Quran* is that it provides the reader with extensive marginal notes from the Muslim exegetical tradition on the meaning of the text.

10 Only Moses is referenced more often.

as its critique of both pagan and Jewish and Christian religious teachings in late antiquity, is based on what it calls *millat Ibrāhīm*—the religion of Abraham.¹¹ Indeed, the ethic of individual responsibility is itself expressly attributed to Ibrāhīm in Q 53:36–37. One can say that a central aim of the Qurʾān's message is to resolve the religious question in the Near East of late antiquity through the restoration of this religion of Abraham, which in turn forms the basis of what we now call Islam.¹²

The Qurʾān's express invocation of Jewish and Christian antecedents and its use of biblical figures, however, has often led Western students of Islam and readers of the Qurʾān to assume that it is at best a derivative work, and at worst a confusing and repetitive melange of themes taken from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament presented in an incoherent style.¹³ For those more sympa-

11 See, for example, Q 2:130 (decrying as a fool anyone who turns his back to the religion of Abraham); 2:135 (contrasting Christianity and Judaism to the upright religion of Abraham); 3:95 (calling on people to follow the upright religion of Abraham); 4:125 (describing those who follow Abraham's upright religion as following the best religion); 6:161 (instructing the Prophet Muḥammad to explain that God guided him to follow the upright religion of Abraham); 16:123 (stating that God revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad that he should follow the upright religion of Abraham); and 22:78 (God explaining to the Muslims that the religion He has given them is that of "your father, Ibrāhīm").

12 For more on the idea of Islam as an "Abrahamic religion," and what that meant in Late Antiquity, see Stroumsa 2015.

13 See, for example, Hitchens 2017 whose chapter on Islam is titled "The Koran is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths," and Pope Benedict XVI (d. 2022), "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections," University of Regensburg, 12 September 2006, 2 (quoting approvingly the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus (d. 1425) as saying, "Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."). One reason for this reception of the Qurʾān in the West is that the Qurʾān does not adopt a narrative approach to its materials. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, it does not "start" with creation and tell the history of a particular people, nor does it tell the story of a particular figure like Jesus in the Gospels. While it is arranged in 114 *sūras*, the order of its chapters doesn't seem to follow any obvious logic, other than by length (except its first *sūra*, al-Fātiḥa, which is recited in daily prayer), with the longest *sūras* coming first, and the shortest *sūras* coming at the end. Individual *sūras* of the Qurʾān, moreover, may include legislative provisions, historical reports and various theological and ethical teachings, interspersed together, without any attempt to isolate one topic from another. Muslim tradition, moreover, teaches that the Prophet Muḥammad received the revelations constituting the Qurʾān episodically over the twenty-three-year period, 12 before Hijra—11/610–632, that constituted his mission, not all at once. Based on the claims of the Muslim tradition, the *sūras* are generally arranged in reverse-chronological order, with the *sūras* that were last revealed coming earlier in the Qurʾān, and its oldest (and shorter) *sūras* coming toward the end. Finally, although Muslim tradition teaches that the revelations constituting the Qurʾān were completed during the Prophet Muḥammad's lifetime, they were not assembled into the book form in which they exist

thetic to its style, the Qur'ān's nonlinear presentation of its materials, its own intertextuality, and its partial telling and retelling of stories of central figures from different perspectives and in different contexts, have the salutary effect of decentering the biblical narrative, and allow the Qur'ān to adopt religious ideas and stories circulating in late antiquity in the Near East, while deploying them to radically different ends.¹⁴ While there may be great value for the positivist historian in tracing the genealogy of certain Qur'ānic themes, such an approach obscures the manner in which the Qur'ān uses shared themes to work a new religious synthesis, and as we will argue here, provides a new interpretation of sacrifice in general and the *Akeda* in particular, as well as providing a new understanding of the divine covenant that frees itself from the logic of sacrifice.

The tendency to see the Qur'ān's narrative regarding Abraham and the *Akeda* as derivative of the Hebrew Bible is reflected in the few English-language works that discuss the Qur'ān's treatment of the *Akeda*, and the themes that emerge from it, such as sacrifice and covenant.¹⁵ In my reconstruction of the Qur'ān's revisionist account of the *Akeda*, I focus on three different passages of the Qur'ān that speak of Abraham, the *Akeda*, and sacrifice: al-Baqara (The Cow), 2:124; al-Ḥajj (The Pilgrimage), 22:27–37; and, al-Ṣāffāt (Those Ranged in Ranks), 37:100–113. The *Akeda* itself is mentioned explicitly only in the last of these three, but the other two selections are included insofar as they cast light on the Qur'ān's negative theology (i.e., what the *Akeda* does *not* stand for) and its positive theology of the *Akeda* (i.e., the true significance of sacrifice), and its own conception the divine covenant. Only by reading these three sets of verses together can we reach the Qur'ān's interpretation of this central event in the Abrahamic religious imagination and understand its distinctive ethic of sacrifice and covenant, and their place in the Qur'ān's religious imaginary. Having reconstructed the Qur'ān's revisionist interpretation of this event, we can then proceed to make our argument of how its recasting of the *Akeda* allows us to

today until the third caliph 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (d. 35/655) assembled an authoritative codex for the text. Muslims refer to the authoritative codex of the Qur'ān as the *muṣḥaf*, which literally means "collection of pages." The Qur'ān itself is immaterial and exists only when it is recited orally in Arabic.

- 14 For a vigorous defense of the Qur'ān's nonlinear style against Western criticism, see Brown 1983.
- 15 See, for example, Delaney 1998, 109; Combs-Schilling 1990; Firestone 1990; Reynolds 2018, 68–69 and 681–682; and Bell 1943, 29–31. A welcome exception to this trend is Sherwood 2004. Sherwood successfully demonstrates how the Qur'ān's narrative of the *Akeda*, and subsequent Muslim exegesis of this event, substantively depart from that of the biblical tradition on much more than the identity of the son who was to have been sacrificed.

imagine a different political theology, one that is more consistent, I argue, with the aspirations of political liberalism.

7.1 *The Qur'ān's Retelling of the Akeda: al-Ṣāffāt (Those Ranged in Ranks), 37:100–113*

And [Abraham] said, "Truly I am going unto my Lord. He will guide me (100). My Lord, give unto me from among the righteous" (101). So We gave him glad tidings of a gentle son (102). When he had become old enough to partake of his father's endeavors, Abraham said, "O my son! I see while dreaming that I am to sacrifice you. So tell me, what do you think?"¹⁶ He replied, "O my father! Do as you are commanded. You will find me, God willing, among those who are patient" (103). But when they had both submitted and Abraham had laid him upon his forehead (104). We called unto him, "O Abraham! (105). Thou has been true to the vision." Thus indeed do We recompense the virtuous (106). Truly this was the manifest trial (107). Then We ransomed him with a great sacrifice (108). And We left [a blessing] upon him among later generations (109): "Peace be upon Abraham" (110). Thus, do We recompense the virtuous (111). Truly he was among Our believing servants (112). And We blessed him and Isaac. And among their progeny are the virtuous and those who clearly wrong themselves (113).

NASR ET AL. 2015, 1093–1095

The first striking difference between the Qur'ān's version of the *Akeda* and that of Genesis is the absence of a direct command from God to Abraham to sacrifice his son.¹⁷ Instead, Abraham has a vision in which it appears to him that he is sacrificing his son. Muslim exegetes differed about the meaning of this vision, whether it was tantamount to a divine command directing Abraham to sacrifice his son, as well as the identity of the son whom Abraham attempted to sacrifice. Some said the dream was a reminder to Abraham that he had

16 The editors of *The Study Quran* translate the question contained in verse 103 as "So consider, what do you see?" They interpret the verb "to see" as alluding to the boy's future destiny as a prophet, while I understand the verb in its ordinary sense, of "to opine." The Arabic used by Abraham in his question to his son is "*fa-nẓur mādhā tarā*." Both verbs used here—*naẓara* and *raʾā*—are used in classical Arabic to describe deliberation and the exchange of views.

17 According to Genesis 22:1–2, "Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, 'Abraham,' and he answered, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you'" (Stein 2006).

once made a vow that, if God gave him a son, he would sacrifice the boy out of love for God. Based on the theological notion that the visions of prophets are revelation, others said that the dream was a direct command from God to Abraham to sacrifice his son. Others, who accepted in principle the notion that dreams could amount to divine commands, rejected this interpretation of the dream, and instead held that the dream amounted merely to a command to perform the preparatory steps that would lead to the sacrifice of his son, but that God never actually ordered him to do it (al-Rāzī 1862, 26:346 reporting all three positions). Others said that Abraham saw *something* in a dream that he *interpreted* as a command to sacrifice his son. The mystic Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) concluded that Abraham misunderstood the dream insofar as he took it at face value and failed to interpret it, even though, in Ibn 'Arabī's words, "visions require interpretation" (*al-ru'yā taṭlub al-ta'bīr*) (Ibn al-'Arabī 1980, 99; Lala 2021, 38–40).¹⁸

What is important from our perspective, however, is that in the Qur'ān, Abraham, instead of saying "here I am," turns to his son to *deliberate* with him about the meaning of the ambiguous vision. Not only does Abraham in Genesis fail to consult his son about the meaning of God's words to him, but the plain sense of Genesis suggests that Abraham did not even bother to inform his son that *he* was destined to be the burnt offering that would be sacrificed.¹⁹ In the Qur'ān's version, the "command" is ambiguous, if indeed there was a command at all, and it is only after the father and son reach a shared meaning of the dream, do they attempt to carry it out.

Another crucial difference is the absence of any express transgenerational covenant as a reward for the attempted sacrifice. Genesis 22:15–18 states:

- ¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven,
- ¹⁶ And said, "By Myself I swear, the LORD declares: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your favored one,
- ¹⁷ I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.
- ¹⁸ All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."

STEIN 2006

¹⁸ This is reflected, according to Ibn 'Arabī, in the Qur'ān's use in the verse of form II of the verb—*ṣaddaqa*—rather than form I—*ṣadaqa*—the former meaning "to believe" and the latter meaning "to be faithful" or "to be truthful."

¹⁹ Later elements of Jewish tradition would introduce the idea that Abraham informed Isaac of the intended sacrifice, and that Isaac willingly embraced his role (Levenson 1993, 190).

While the Qur'ān mentions blessing Abraham in connection with this event, it is a much more modest blessing, a benediction of peace, "Peace be upon Abraham." The Qur'ān's reticence to use the near sacrifice of the son as an occasion for a trans-generational covenantal blessing establishing earthly dominion is not only consistent with its ambiguous treatment of the attempted sacrifice itself, but also in its refusal to name Abraham's son. From the perspective of the Qur'ān, it doesn't matter who Abraham's *true* beloved son was; whatever virtue resulted from participating in this near sacrifice accrued solely to the participants. Accordingly, their progeny is not singled out for a special claim to virtue. While some are virtuous, others "clearly wrong themselves."²⁰ Conspicuously, there is no mention of a temporal reward in the form of sovereignty.

7.2 *The Qur'ān, the Covenant, and the Chosenness of Abraham: al-Baqara, 2:124*

While the Qur'ān's rendition of the *Akeda* undermines the notion of a divine transgenerational covenant that results from the near sacrifice of Abraham's son, the Qur'ān in 2:124 explicitly negates it:

And [remember] when his Lord tried Abraham with [certain] words, and he fulfilled them. He said, "I am making you an imam for mankind." He said, "And of my progeny?" He said, "My covenant does not include the wrongdoers."

NASR ET AL. 2015, 57

Like the Qur'ān's story of the *Akeda*, the most important element—the precise content of God's trial of Abraham that earned him his lofty status of "imam for mankind"—is left ambiguous. There is a clear temptation here to gloss the

20 The antecedent for the pronoun "him" in Q 37:113 ("And We blessed him and Isaac. And among their progeny are the virtuous and those who clearly wrong themselves."), is ambiguous. Just as Muslim exegetes differed over whether the near sacrifice was of Isaac or Ishmael (Ismā'il), they also differed regarding the antecedent of this pronoun. See, for example, al-Qurtūbī 1964, 15:113–114. The editors of *The Study Quran*, in their commentary on this verse, point out that it is an implicit repudiation of "the attitude of some Jews and Christians when they say, *We are the children of God, and His beloved ones* (Q 5:18)" (Nasr et al. 2015, 1095). The Qur'ān affirms the intransitivity of virtue in other verses as well, e.g., al-Baqara Q 2:133–134 ("Or were you witnesses when death came to Jacob, when he said to his children, 'What will you worship after I am gone?' They said, 'We shall worship thy God and the God of thy fathers, Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac: one God and unto Him we submit' (133). That is a community that has passed away. Theirs is what they earned and yours is what you earned, and you will not be questioned about that which they used to do (134).").

ambiguous phrase “words” in light of the *Akeda*. That is precisely what Gabriel Said Reynolds, in his 2018 work, *The Qur'ān and the Bible*, does. Despite recognizing that much of Muslim exegesis associates these words with the completion of the rites of the Pilgrimage, Reynolds makes the following observation:

It seems likely, however, that the “test” here is a reference to the way God tested Abraham (Genesis 22:1; cf. Q 37:102–110) with the command to sacrifice his son. This would match well with what follows (Q 37:125–128), which is closely connected with the story of the sacrifice in Genesis 22 ... When the divine voice of the Qur'ān declares that he is making Abraham “the Imam [or leader] of mankind,” it reflects Genesis 22, where God rewards Abraham for his obedience.

REYNOLDS 2018, 67–68

The editors of *The Study Quran*, by contrast, provide the following gloss on the meaning of the “words” that constituted God's test of Abraham:

The commentators have differed widely over th[is] question. Some believe these *words* were commands given to Abraham to institute various kinds of bodily cleanliness, grooming, and ritual purifications. Others believe they were the rituals and prayers he was to perform, specifically the central rites of the *hajj*, which Muslims consider to have originated with Abraham ... Others see them as trials of suffering, such as circumcision, the sacrifice of his son (Q 37:02), and the fire into which he was cast by his people, but which God made to be cool (Q 21:68–69).

Although some Muslim readers agreed with Reynolds' attempt to tie God's designation of Abraham as an imam for humanity by virtue of his successful performance of the “test” of the *Akeda*, many Muslim readers of this verse resisted this reading. They instead read God's demand as imposing a certain kind of discipline on Abraham which was also appropriate for the *ordinary* person insofar as these practices subsequently come to form universal practices of Islam. This is indeed more consistent with the notion of Abraham being an “imam for mankind,” in the sense that his title endows him with the status of a universal lawgiver. But whatever it was that he was commanded (or not commanded) to do in the *Akeda* can in no way be taken as universal law. Abraham's status as an imam for humanity, therefore, is arguably not due to the exceptional sacrifice of the *Akeda*, but rather because of his faithful performance of *ordinary* obligations, or what Kahn might call the “norm.” Much of Muslim tradition would identify Abraham's universal lawmaking in

his establishment of quotidian ritual and grooming laws not in his apparent readiness to sacrifice his son. The most significant aspect of the verse therefore is the deliberate *repression* of the *Akeda* contrasted with the explicit *emphasis* on the “norm” that Abraham represents: God’s covenant does not include the wrongdoer, even if the wrongdoer is Abraham’s own descendant.²¹

7.3 *The Qur’ān’s Affirmative Theory of Sacrifice: al-Ḥajj (The Pilgrimage), 22:27–38*

We have seen thus far that the Qur’ān’s version of the *Akeda* explicitly recasts it in three important ways. First, it draws to our attention the ambiguous nature of the command itself and asks us to consider both whether such a command ever took place, and if it did, what it meant. Second, it negates any covenantal significance to Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son, mooted the question of the son’s identity. Third, it excludes wrongdoers from God’s covenant. If God’s covenant does not produce a chosen people, be they the biological descendants of Isaac, or the spiritual descendants of Jesus through the Church, who does it include?

Insofar as Islam is typically understood to be an Abrahamic religion, one is tempted to conclude that Qur’ānic supersessionism operates in a fashion similar to that of Pauline Christianity, whereby Jesus became recognized as the “true” Isaac, and the Church his legitimate descendants to the exclusion of Torah observant Jews (Levenson 1993, 216–217). In this model of covenantal community, Muḥammad becomes the “true” recipient of God’s covenant, and his followers replace the Church as the particular objects of God’s covenant. This is the tack, for example, that Carol Delaney takes in her book, *Abraham on Trial*, where she interprets contemporary conflicts between and among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as a “struggle over the patrimony: who is the rightful heir of the promises, who is the seed of Abraham” (Delaney 1998, 109). It is no coincidence then that she interprets the Muslim practice of sacrifice, which takes place both during the Pilgrimage and on the Feast of the Sacrifice (ʿĪd al-Adḥā), as “establish[ing] a blood brotherhood” (Delaney 1998, 109).

Our reading of the Qur’ān’s revisionist account of the *Akeda* casts doubt on the plausibility of Delaney’s characterization of Muslim sacrifice. The Qur’ān’s affirmation of sacrifice in 22:36–37 negates propitiation as the motive for sacrifice (Delaney 1998, 121, 126 and 137–138),²² and replaces it with a feast of

21 This reading of the verse is supported by the fact that the two verses immediately preceding it are addressed to the Israelites, reminding them of God’s favor to them, and that on the Day of Judgment, individuals will be judged solely based on their own deeds (Q 2:122–123).

22 She argues that the sacrifice of Isaac came to be understood as an expiatory offering that required the shedding of blood and that in Christianity this idea becomes epitomized in the redeeming function of God the Father’s sacrifice of His son, Christ.

thanksgiving and makes no promise of dominion. Equally significant, Muslim sacrifice is not a re-enactment of the biblical archetype of the father sacrificing his beloved son, and for that reason, the obligation to perform sacrifices on the occasion of the Feast of the Sacrificial Animals applies to women as much as men.²³ Sacrificants offer their animals in gratitude to God for their good fortune, spiritual and material. Instead of dedicating the flesh to God, or making a burnt offering of the carcass, they eat the animals' meat, and share it with others, particularly those in want.

As the following verses make clear, the Qur'ān quite expressly rejects the notion that blood sacrifice has any relationship to true piety. Conspicuously, the Qur'ān associates the *proper* notion of sacrifice with Abraham, by identifying him as the human founder of the Pilgrimage and its rites, which include a sacrifice of thanksgiving:

“And proclaim [O Abraham!] the *hajj* among mankind: they shall come to thee on foot and upon all [manner of] lean beast, coming from all deep and distant mountain highways (27), that they may witness benefits for them and mention the Name of God, during known days, over the four-legged cattle He has provided them. So eat thereof, and feed the wretched poor ...” (28). Thus it is. And whosoever magnifies the rituals²⁴ of God, truly that comes from the reverence of hearts (32). You shall have benefits in them, for a term appointed. Thereafter their lawful place of sacrifice shall be at the Ancient House (33). For every community We have appointed a rite, that they might mention the Name of God over the four-legged cattle He has provided them. Your God is One: so submit

23 Islamic law governing sacrifice is too complicated to be outlined in detail this context, but in this context, it is sufficient to point out that the law of sacrifice applies equally to both genders. See, e.g., the Egyptian Mālikī jurist al-Dardīr (d. 1201/1786), who explains that the obligation to offer a sacrifice on the occasion of the Feast of the Sacrificial Animals, applies to all free persons of sufficient means, without regard to gender, that it is commendable (*nudiba*) for the sacrificant, whether male or female, to perform the sacrifice herself, and it is discouraged (*kuriha*) to appoint a third party to perform the sacrifice without an overriding necessity (*darūra*) (al-Dardīr 1972, 2:137 and 145).

24 The Arabic word, *sha'ā'ir*, in post-Qur'ānic usage comes to mean rituals, or symbols, generically, but literally it derives from the name of a camel that had been consecrated for sacrifice during the Pilgrimage. The pre-Islamic Arabs would do this by “marking” the camel with a knife stroke on its side and garlanding it. Accordingly, the translation adopted by the editors of *The Study Quran* in this case is correct for verse 32, but it leads to confusion in verse 33, which reads “You shall have benefits in them,” the antecedent of “them” being the camels marked for sacrifice. The commentary on verse 33, however, clarifies the point. They say, “By most accounts, this verse refers to the benefits derived from the sacrificial animals, such as their milk, and wool and the ability to ride them” (Nasr et al. 2015, 837n33).

unto Him, and give glad tidings to the humble (34). whose hearts quiver when God is mentioned, and who bear patiently what befalls them, who perform the prayer, and who spend of that which We have provided them (35). And We have placed the sacrificial camels for you among God's rituals. There is good for you in them. So mention the Name of God over them as they line up. Then when they have fallen upon their flanks, eat of them, and feed the needy who solicit and those who do not. Thus have We made them subservient unto you, that haply you may give thanks (36). Neither their flesh nor their blood will reach God, but the reverence from you reaches Him. Thus He made them subservient unto you, that you might magnify God for having guided you. And give glad tidings to the virtuous (37).

NASR ET AL. 2015, 836–839

The Qur'ānic affirmation of animal sacrifice set out in connection with Abraham's proclamation of the Pilgrimage affirms that the ritual of animal sacrifice is properly motivated by a feeling of gratitude in response to God's favor. Divine favor is manifested in the fact that humans have dominion over livestock, which has proven so useful to humanity, whether as a source of food, clothing, or transportation. Instead of sacrifice entailing a rejection of these useful features of livestock—a rejection which was manifested in pre-Islamic religions through transferring it to the deity through destruction of the sacrificial object²⁵—the Qur'ān directs sacrificants to continue to benefit from them until the time comes to sacrifice them, and after they sacrifice their animals, to eat of their flesh, and share it with the poor and destitute, those who ask for help, and those who don't.²⁶ The reorientation of sacrifice away from propitiation, and towards satisfaction of the sacrificant's own needs (Q 22:28 and 22:33) and solidarity with the misfortunate (Q 22:28 and 22:36), is followed by a

25 For a succinct overview of the history of sacrifice in religion, see Henninger 2005, 7997–8008.

26 The pre-Islamic Arabs, for example, would not make any beneficial use of an animal that had been consecrated for sacrifice between the time it was marked for sacrifice and its actual sacrifice (Nasr et al. 2015, 837–838n33). The pre-Islamic Arabs also would not eat the meat of any animals that they had sacrificed ("In the pre-Islamic Age of Ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) ... the idolaters would not eat the meat they sacrificed") (Nasr et al. 2015, 838n36). Indeed, the fact that Islam allows for the complete beneficial use of the flesh of the sacrificial animal led Henninger to claim that sacrifice in Islam is just another form of almsgiving and is only a blood sacrifice in form (Henninger 2005, 8006). He does not, however, speculate why Islam would preserve the form of blood sacrifice while emptying it of its content. For more background on sacrifice in pre-Islamic Arabian religion, see Chelhod 1955.

recognition of the universality of animal sacrifice, albeit in different, particular forms, as a proper act of thanksgiving. This is taken as evidence for the appropriateness of a natural, universal religion to which all humanity should orient itself (Q 22:34).

The verses then conclude with a repudiation of blood sacrifice and its related notion of propitiation through destruction, affirming instead that it is only inner piety that reaches God. The verb used in that verse to repudiate blood sacrifice—neither their flesh nor their blood will reach (*yanāla*) God—evokes the previously discussed Q 2:124, where God uses the same verb to disavow the notion that His covenant is based on descent: “My covenant does not include (*yanāl*) the wrongdoers.” This reconstituted conception of sacrifice is therefore linked to God’s covenant through the shared quality of uprightness—acting justly. The ubiquity of animal sacrifice—properly understood as an act of thanksgiving and solidarity, not blood sacrifice—discloses humanity’s natural disposition toward showing gratitude toward God and solidarity toward the misfortunate, reveals humanity’s moral unity, and the desirability of their common submission to God on the basis of natural religion.

The next verse (Q 22:35) spells out some of the features of this natural religion the Qur’ān identifies: reverence of God; fortitude in the face of adversity; regular prayer; and, sharing with the less fortunate.²⁷ The sacrifice²⁸ established by Islam therefore is not a commemoration of the *Akeda* so much as its transcendence through the establishment of a new norm, one grounded in

27 It would be possible to cite numerous verses of the Qur’ān that describe the contents of natural religion, perhaps most prominently the verse of righteousness (Q 2:177): “It is not piety to turn your faces toward the east and west. Rather, the pious man is he who believes in God, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets; who gives wealth, despite loving it, to kinsfolk, orphans, the indigent, the traveler, the beggar, and for [the ransom of] slaves; and performs the prayer and gives the alms; and those who fulfill their covenants when they pledge them, and those who are patient in misfortune, hardship, and moments of peril. It is they who are truthful, and it is they who are the reverent” (Nasr et al. 2015, 75–76, with minor adjustments to their translation).

28 Technically, two different sacrifices take place on the tenth of Dhū l-Hijja, the tenth day of the month of the Pilgrimage. The pilgrims slaughter their animals in Minā, a valley outside of Mecca. Various terms are used to describe these animals, such as *hady*, *budn*, or *nusuk*. The animals that Muslims who are not performing the Pilgrimage sacrifice, by contrast, are referred to as *udhiya* or *dahiyaya*. The technical rules governing each sacrifice differ slightly: a camel, for example, is the preferred sacrificial animal of a pilgrim, while a ram is the preferred animal of a Muslim sacrificant who is not on pilgrimage. More importantly, the pilgrims do not observe the ceremonies of the Feast of the Sacrifice. For these reasons, with respect to those on pilgrimage, the tenth day of Dhū l-Hijja is called *yawm al-naḥr*, the day of the slaughter, while for the rest of the Muslim world, that day is referred to as The Feast of the Sacrifice (ʿĪd al-Adḥā).

thanks and expressive of (potential) universal human solidarity. The Qur'anic covenant offered by God is not mediated through a particular human being or a particular community, but rather is immediate, universal, and preternatural, as described in al-A'rāf (The Heights), 7:172:

And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their progeny and made them bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" they said, "Yea, we bear witness"—lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, "Truly of this we were heedless."

Sacrifice from this perspective is not the cause of the covenant so much as it is evidence of this universal, divine covenant. The account of sacrifice affirmed in *sūra* 22, al-Ḥajj (The Pilgrimage), therefore, outlines a vision of humanity which, despite their division into different communities (*umma*), is nevertheless united in the affirmation of a unique creator, adherence to a common law, and a commitment to thanksgiving and solidarity. The moral unity of humanity reflects the preternatural divine covenant in which God endowed humanity with a natural inclination toward recognition of God, and in which humanity accepted to undertake the obligations attendant from this act of recognition. In light of this preternatural divine covenant, the particularistic covenants associated with propitiatory sacrifice generally, and blood sacrifice particularly, are rendered not just moot, but dismissed as superstitious.²⁹

29 The Qur'an's dismissal of various pagan Arabian religious practices which entailed the destruction, in whole or in part, of the beneficial uses associated with their livestock and crops in favor of their gods, and its condemnation of what may have been a kind of ritualized sacrifice of infants that at least some pre-Islamic Arabians practiced, as superstitious, is clear. See, for example, al-An'ām (The Cattle), 6:138–139 (Nasr et al. 2015, 392–393); al-Mā'idā (The Table Spread), 5:103 (Nasr et al. 2015, 329); and, al-An'ām (The Cattle), 6:137 (Nasr et al. 2015, 392). The Qur'an does not single out Christian and Jewish notions of sacrifice for direct criticism in the way it does for pagan Arabs, but it does denounce vehemently their claims of enjoying a particular covenant with God that distinguishes them from the rest of humanity. See, for example, al-Baqara (The Cow), 2:111–112: ("And they [i.e., the Christians and the Jews] said, 'None will enter the Garden unless he be a Jew or a Christian.' That is only their wishful thinking. Say, 'Bring your proof, if you are truthful' (111). Nay, whosoever submits his face to God, while being virtuous, shall have his reward with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them; nor shall they grieve (112)" (Nasr et al. 2015, 52–53).), and al-Mā'idā (The Table Spread), 5:18 ("And the Jews and the Christians say, 'We are the children of God, and His beloved ones.' Say, 'Why then does He punish you for your sins?' Nay, but you are mortals of His creating. He forgives whomsoever He will, and He punishes whomsoever He will, and unto God belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth and whatsoever is between them, and unto Him is the journey's end" (Nasr et al. 2015, 286–287).).

Finally, the Qur'ānic rendition of the *Akeda* disassociates sacrifice from martyrdom. While sacrifice is a regular part of ritual, martyrdom is not, nor is it celebrated in formal ritual. A person may be required to risk death for the sake of the community in cases of necessity, e.g., when his town comes under immediate attack, and it may even be commendable to participate in wars to spread God's law, but the individual is not *seeking* death: when bearing arms is an obligation, the goal is to repel the enemy, and when it is voluntary, it is to assure the supremacy of God's law.³⁰ On the contrary, the Muslim soldier is prohibited from recklessly pursuing the enemy in circumstances that would bring about his own death without any plausible military advantage (al-Dardīr 1972, 2:283).³¹ The martyr, as a medieval theologian put it, is rewarded not for dying—because he is not responsible for his own death—but rather for courageously facing death in order to protect the community (Ibn 'Abd al-Salām n.d., 1:116). Likewise, martyrdom is not limited to those who die fighting the enemy or at the hands of persecutors: women who die in childbirth are martyrs, individuals who die from the plague or other diseases are martyrs, and so are those who die by drowning, fire, or in a collapsed building (Ibn Ḥanbal 1993, 2:380). Symbolically, then, martyrdom is viewed as both incidental to ritual life insofar as it is contingent, and remarkably mundane, insofar as it includes anyone who resolutely faces death as the inevitable end of every human being (Ibn Ḥanbal 1993, 6:314).³²

8 The Qur'ānic Theology of Sacrifice and a Political Theology of the Reasonable and Rational

In this section, I argue that the Qur'ān's retelling of the *Akeda* offers an alternative interpretation of sacrifice and covenant that renders these sacred concepts

30 Muslim jurists distinguish between two kinds of religiously sanctioned campaigning (*jihād*). The first is known as *jihād al-dafʿ* or *jihād al-ḍarūra*, a war of necessity or to repel an invading enemy. The second is known as *jihād al-ṭalab* or *jihād al-ikhtiyār*, a campaign in pursuit of the enemy or a war of choice, to use a more contemporary term. Participation in the former is obligatory for those exposed to enemy attack, while participation in the latter is voluntary (see, e.g., al-Dardīr 1972, 2:267 and 274).

31 Al-Dardīr states a soldier may attack the enemy, despite overwhelming odds, when two conditions are satisfied: (1) his purpose is to support God's religion, not to prove his bravery or to obtain booty, and (2) he knows, or has a reasonable belief, that his action will have a military benefit. If these conditions are not satisfied, however, then to do so is impermissible, and if he dies, he dies a sinner, even though he appears to be a martyr.

32 He reports that the Prophet Muḥammad, when asked about martyrs, said that most of the martyrs of his community would die in their beds, and that "God knows best the intention of many of the men who die in battle."

more consistent with liberal democratic ideals. In my reading of the Qur'ān's version of the *Akeda*, the Qur'ān offers a paradigm of sacrifice that is both universal and particular, and reasonable and rational,³³ grounded in thanksgiving and solidarity, rather than propitiation rooted in blood sacrifice. By doing so, it disentangles sacrifice from martyrdom, and while it recognizes, even valorizes the latter, it renders it incidental and even mundane. The Qur'ānic account of the *Akeda* also bridges the gap between the normative and the phenomenological by placing our capacity for deliberation at the center of our response to the exception, rather than Kahn's notion that the exception renders us "speechless," the equivalent of the Hebrew Bible's Abraham who can only say "Here am I."

Kahn tells us that the point of political theology is not to make politics a branch of theology, in the fashion of a fundamentalist religious movement. Rather, it is a call for us to recognize the sacred in the political, and perhaps recognize that the true enemy of the political is not the persistence of the sacred, but the commercial spirit which, in its never-ending quest for profit, subjects everything to the laws of market rationality, thereby destroying the possibility of the sacred, whether in the secular domain or the religious.³⁴ Political theology, however, depends on analogy to a prior archetype. For that reason, Kahn identifies Abraham's sacrifice as set out in the Hebrew Bible as the central archetype of the political that forms the basis of American political theology.

But as I suggested above, Kahn's account of political theology does not account for what theology might describe as the demonic. Kahn's account of political theology therefore leaves us with no explanation of how a democratic people might reliably distinguish between the truly exceptional moment that constitutes revelation, and in political terms, successfully establishes, or at least aims to establish or to defend, a constitutional state governed in accordance with rational principles of the rule of law, and a false revelation that is

33 In Rawls' technical language, the reasonable and the rational refer to the two moral powers of citizens. The former refers to the capacity to offer and accept fair terms of cooperation, and the latter refers to the capacity to form, revise, and pursue specific conceptions of the good. A reasonable person only pursues his rational ends using means that are consistent with the equal rights of other reasonable persons to pursue their rational ends.

34 In this respect, it is revealing that Islamic law, although it allows the sacrificant to consume the entirety of the sacrificial animal himself, share it with others, or both, prohibits the sacrificant from commercially exploiting the animal in any way. One may say, then, that the element of destruction scholars of religion identify as being characteristic of sacrifice is satisfied insofar as a Muslim sacrificant, by choosing to sacrifice an animal, disclaims any commercial interest he or she might have in the animal (see, e.g., al-Dardir 1972, 2:147).

a mere pretext for tyranny. Yet it seems that the commitment to democracy requires faith that it is possible for the people to do so. Kahn's account can also be criticized for conflating sacrifice with martyrdom, the former being a ubiquitous and necessary feature to sustain democratic life, while the latter should be viewed as incidental to democratic life, and crucially, dispensable. The Qur'ān's recasting of the *Akeda*, and its clear separation of sacrifice from martyrdom allow us to see this more clearly.

As I have suggested above, Rawls' conception of political liberalism cannot be reduced to the rational in the way that Kahn uses that term. Reason, while it may guide us to the veil of ignorance and allow us to draw up what a just society would look like, is insufficient to bring about that political ideal. It is only our non-rational capacity for reasonableness that makes the liberal project plausible. The possibility of establishing a well-ordered society, and maintaining its institutions if these are ever established, depends in equal measure on our capacity to be reasonable and rational. The Qur'ānic account of sacrifice does just that, inscribing a ritual practice that vindicates both of the moral powers required to maintain the well-ordered society, and the Qur'ān's account of humanity's primordial covenant with God explains why a sense of the sacred is innate in all of us.

Alternative stories, and alternative conceptions of the sacred provide important resources for expressing different political theologies. The Qur'ān's recasting of the *Akeda* is one such alternative story, and it provides an account of Abraham's sacrifice that provides a potential solution from the liberal perspective to the dilemmas present in Kahn's use of the *Akeda* as the archetype of the political, whether in the form derived from the Hebrew Bible or of the New Testament. It does so by turning the exception into a moment of deliberation that recognizes the universal capacity of human beings to interpret the divine. It substitutes the destruction inherent in a propitiatory sacrifice for a sacrifice of thanksgiving that recognizes individuals' particular interests while affirming their solidarity with others. The sacredness of sacrifice is retained, but is transformed from a hierarchical relationship with God into a horizontal relationship of solidarity with one's fellow human beings.³⁵ Conversely, it renders martyrdom incidental to the manifestation of the sacred, and reduces it to almost the mundane. Finally, it affirms the universality of this divine covenant, despite its manifestation in various particular forms.

35 In traditional Muslim practice, the sacrificant is commended to reserve one-third of the animal's meat for himself and his family, give one-third to the poor, and invite others to share with him the remaining third.

The ambiguous nature of the exception invites, even demands, interpretation. Accordingly, in the Qur'ān's account, Abraham deliberates together with his son regarding the dream's meaning, and only after mutual deliberation do they agree on a common course of action. Instead of the exception constituting an authoritarian intervention at the expense of deliberation, it *prompts* deliberation, reinforcing a politics of mutual friendship rather than a hierarchy of superior and inferior. The Qur'ānic Abraham assumes, moreover, that the law, in some fundamental way, is shared between the prophet who receives revelation, and the people who are subject to its command.³⁶ Without such an assumption, Abraham's decision to consult his son would have been pointless. The Qur'ān's version of the *Akeda* does not negate the possibility of the exception so much as it vests the recipients of the command with shared authority to determine whether the exception exists, and if so, its proper scope. A political theology based on the Qur'ān's version of the *Akeda* rejects the unilateral claim to exercise the exception and teaches instead that even the exception must be the product of mutual deliberation, *particularly* when it involves the question of killing or being killed.

Kahn's conception of sacrifice is problematic because it always entails destruction of the particular in the cause of the universal. Whether we take as our model the sacrifice of Isaac in the Hebrew Bible or that of Christ, both assume that the function of the sacrifice is to propitiate the deity, that the most effective means of doing so is destruction of the beloved son, and that the status of being chosen is achieved by a free embrace of one's own destruction. Accordingly, Abraham earns God's pleasure by agreeing to sacrifice Isaac (and on many interpretations, actually carries out the command), and Isaac's free embrace of his martyrdom restores him to life *and* redeems his descendants. The secularized transformation of such a concept is that citizens must sacrifice themselves for the good of the state, thus giving rise to Kahn's claim that God's arbitrary command to Abraham to sacrifice his son provides the basis for the state's arbitrary power to command citizens to kill and be killed.

But this kind of sacrifice is inconsistent with the idea of a liberal, well-ordered society, which exists not for the good of the state, but for the good of

36 In this respect, the account of Islamic law given by the Egyptian jurist, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285), is instructive: the Prophet, insofar as he is Prophet, receives divine speech and transmits it to the people. Insofar as the Prophet formulates general rules *based* on interpretation of divine speech, or applying general rules to adjudicate specific disputes, in each case, he is acting as an ordinary legal interpreter (*mujtahid*) or judge (*qāḍī*), and in the case of the latter, is vulnerable to making erroneous judgments if the parties mislead him as to the true facts of the case (see al-Qarāfī 2017, 122).

its citizens. While there may be occasions on which citizens could rightly be called on to die, they do so out of solidarity with their fellows, not to redeem them. More generally, the creation and maintenance of a well-ordered society limits the kinds of demands that can be placed on citizens. Citizens may need to sacrifice, but the sacrifice that is demanded of them must satisfy the criterion of reciprocity and qualify as “reasonable.” Otherwise, they must be free to pursue their own rational good. The obligation to die for a well-ordered society must be incidental to its existence, not its *raison d'être*. If the model of sacrifice provided by Genesis fails from the perspective of political liberalism because it conflates the good of the state with the good of its citizens, the Christian model of sacrifice fails too because the pure altruism entailed in Christ's sacrifice renders politics moot: a perfectly other-regarding people does not need political society insofar as they have no particular ends worth pursuing or that could lead to the conflict that renders politics necessary.

The Qur'ān's affirmation of the norm of sacrifice which Muslims celebrate on the Feast of the Sacrifice, by contrast, expressly unites, in Rawls' language, the rational and the reasonable: the Qur'ān declares that the pilgrim is both self-interested (“that they may witness benefits for them,” Q 22:27), and altruistic, by sharing in his good fortune with others out of gratitude for existing in a world that so providentially provided him with those benefits. Both the pilgrim at Minā on the day of the slaughter, and the non-pilgrim Muslim sacrificant on the Feast of the Sacrifice, pursue their own “rational” interests in the sacrifice by eating from the offering, while manifesting their “reasonableness” by sharing their good fortune with those who are not so fortunate.

Kahn contrasts the social contract as the rational basis for the origin of the political with sacrifice as the state's origin from the perspective of political theology, but the Qur'ān's interpretation of the *Akeda* suggests that the state's origin lies in both the rational quest for individual advantage, *and* the universal recognition that solidarity is the proper response to the iniquities that contingency plays in our social lives. In contrast to the competing models of sacrifice provided by Isaac and Christ, the model of Qur'ānic sacrifice unifies self-regarding and other-regarding motives, in the same way that a citizen of a liberal regime is both rational and reasonable. By making this kind of sacrifice a regular feature of ritual life, it recognizes that maintenance of the political community depends on regular and ongoing *modest* sacrifices that renew ties of mutual solidarity among the citizens without disabling them from pursuing their own rational good. Martyrdom is recognized, but pushed to the margins of ritual observance and extended in such a way as to make it virtually mundane, in contrast to the heroic martyrdoms of Isaac or Christ.

9 Conclusion

Kahn's assumption that political liberalism has no space for the sacred is perhaps a reflection of an overly narrow conception of the sacred, drawn too exclusively from Judeo-Christian interpretations of the *Akeda*. Both of these sacrificial models are blood sacrifices, and destruction is an essential requirement in producing redemption: it is the shedding of the sacrifice's blood that renews the community through the creation of a covenantal bond, whether it is the national community of Israel in the case of Isaac's sacrifice, or all those who accept the Church, in the case of Christ's. The Qur'ān's interpretation of the *Akeda* offers a different interpretation: instead of the blood sacrifice of his son that Abraham believed he was commanded to fulfill, Abraham establishes a sacrifice of thanksgiving rooted in gratitude and that expresses solidarity. As interpreted by the Qur'ān, this means that individuals are not required to destroy their most valuable possessions, to say nothing of their lives, in order to earn favor with God. They are entitled to continue to enjoy these things, provided they *sacrifice* a portion of their bounty with others. As I argued above, this suggests a community based on both the rational and the reasonable. This community is not simply the product of the hypothetical terms of cooperation that rational, risk-averse persons would agree to behind a veil of ignorance, but it is also based on the historical experience of the real world, filled with its bounties and its tragedies. This universal shared experience produces the presence of the sacred in the form of both gratefulness and solidarity, without destroying our individuality. The Qur'ān's revisionist theology of the *Akeda*, therefore, points the way to a political theology of the reasonable and the rational, and locates the site of sovereignty primarily in the individual citizen and her ongoing willingness to manifest the ideal of reasonableness (cf. Meguid 2017, 13),³⁷ at times by foregoing her own rational interest, and at times by standing up to the unreasonable demands of other citizens.

The Qur'ān posits a preternatural covenant between God and humanity that endows all human beings with the capacity to recognize true claims of revelation and reject false ones. This too is an element of faith that political liberalism requires. Because no system of law can provide for every eventuality or every crisis, sustaining just institutions requires faith that ordinary individuals have the resources to judge when an exception is genuine, i.e., it affirms the norm, and when it is counterfeit, i.e., simply lawlessness. The Qur'ānic idea of a

37 In that article, Abdel Meguid argues that, in the political thought of the medieval Muslim theologian al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), sovereignty is constituted in a bottom-up fashion from the resources available to the individual rational subject.

universal, preternatural covenant that is prior to historical covenants explains why we are predisposed to distinguish voices of true divine prophecy from diabolical whisperings.³⁸ And so the liberal answer to Kahn's question of the dangerousness of the exception is ultimately our faith in the capacity of the *individual* to exercise the power of exception, and in such circumstances, defy the command of a madman (or woman) who would arbitrarily destroy human civilization, and preserve the norm of collective human existence.

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38 Cf. Schmitt 2005, particularly chapter 4 "On the Counterrevolutionary Philosophy of the State (de Maistre, Bonald, Donoso Cortés)."

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The “Para-narrative” Aims of Qur’ānic Narrating

An Examination of the Story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in the Qur’ān and Bible

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1 Introduction

Qur’ānic narratives are “an indispensable dimension of the Qur’ānic text [and] it is often overlooked that the Qur’ān is par excellence a storybook, and that it teaches through its stories” (Johns 1993, 41–42). In view of the fact that they have been constructed for the transmission of moral or theologically-driven messages, these narratives continue to serve as “powerful teaching devices for the community of the faithful” (Stowasser 1994, 3–4) in terms of *‘ibra* (lessons) and *hikma* (wisdom) (Q 12:3, 12:111). However, the idea that Qur’ānic narratives merely provide aesthetic appeal or are simply vehicles for transmitting moral, ethical, and even theological messages has been challenged in recent scholarship.

According to Neuwirth for example, unlike biblical narratives which have a “meticulous shaping of personages [and] sophisticated coding and de-coding of motives” (Neuwirth 2006, 106), which are presented in a “roughly chronological sequence of events” (Neuwirth 2006, 97), Qur’ānic narration “pursues complex ‘para-narrative’ aims”. These shape and influence their telling in various ways: the frequency with which they are (re)visited; their content; what is told and what is left untold; as well as the depth and detail in which these stories are related. Accordingly, some stories are depicted as being deliberately explored whilst others are intentionally left out (Q 40:78, 4:164, 20:99, 11:100). Some stories have been narrated in full and others only partially (Q 40:78, 4:164) (Campbell 2009, 11). Those that have been narrated are concise and direct (Albayrak 2000, 15) and devoid of detail, reflecting the highly contextualized nature of Qur’ānic narratives. The Joseph narrative remains the only fully coherent narrative of the Qur’ān; all others tend to be related in a fragmentary manner. They are told either alongside others in a listing form or at times, shorter narrative excerpts are embedded in larger stretches of narrative.

Moreover, because of the Qur’ān’s tendency to repeat itself, in ways that are seen as “occasionally inconsistent or even contradictory” (Reynolds 2010, 236),

Qur’ānic narratives are often accused of “lacking a chronological framework [for the] events of pre-Qur’ānic history” that they often narrate (Neuwirth 2006, 107). Western scholarship has frequently put this down to the Prophet Muḥammad’s awareness of the Bible from his Jewish/Christian informers or to the speed of the haphazard editing and codification process (Reynolds 2010, 250; Neuwirth 2006, 98). Some scholars have dismissed these recurrences as seeking to rectify deficiencies in the previous version(s). However, Neuwirth points out that they nevertheless deserve to be examined as a testimony to the “continuing education” of the early Qur’ānic community particularly in their “development and reinforcement of moral or theological consensus that is reflected in the narrative texts” (Neuwirth 2006, 107).

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate that Qur’ānic narration is a multifaceted and multi-purpose phenomenon. There are multiple layers to its “development and reinforcement of moral or theological consensus” (Neuwirth 2006, 107). For example, one of the theologically motivated para-narrative agendas of recounting the Solomon narrative is to vindicate and exonerate key prophetic and non-prophetic figures from sacred history regarding whom perceptions became distorted during and after their lifetime. However, these para-narrative agendas of the Qur’ān’s narratives cannot be fully known unless we compare the Qur’ānic telling with its biblical predecessor.

The Qur’ān tells stories from the Bible that are recognizable but told in different ways (Albayrak 2000, 7, e.g., Q 27:76). Some of the narrative details revealed were new, which was put forth as evidence of the Prophet’s legitimate and valid prophetic status. Regardless, Reynolds rightly remarks that it “could not possibly exist without its scriptural predecessors as subtexts” (Reynolds 2010, 234). As opposed to retelling a story, “the Qur’ān often employs [a] single word, or a simple phrase, that should bring the entire story to the mind of a biblically-minded audience” (Reynolds 2010, 234). In truth, “without knowledge of the biblical account, the audience is left in a state of bewilderment” (Reynolds 2010, 234). The Qur’ān’s frequent recourse to allusions and epithets “implies that the audience is able to connect the symbolic name with the character’s proper name ... at times the Qur’ān itself explicitly evokes the audience’s knowledge of biblical traditions¹ ... the subsequent account is thus introduced as a reflection on the meaning of a story that is already well known” (Reynolds 2010, 234). This connection is because the sociocultural context of the Qur’ān was one in which people from different faiths and beliefs were constantly interacting. According to Saeed,

1 In several other cases the Qur’ān introduces its reflections on Biblical traditions with the imperative *udhkur* (recalling, remembering, or reminder) (Reynolds 2010, 235).

this interaction gave rise to a rich resource of legends, myths, ideas, historical figures, images, and rituals, which the Qurʾān used to relate its narratives, norms and values to the context of *Hijāz*. The stories of the prophets it chose were relevant to the region be they from biblical or other sources.

SAEED 2006, 118

Thus, Qurʾānic narratives may accurately be labeled as a form of highly contextualized discourse phenomena (Wodak and Rheindorf 2017, 22). Since the Qurʾān is in dialogue with other Abrahamic sacred texts, which constitutes what Sunderland refers to as “intertexts” (Sunderland 2004, 30), Qurʾānic narrative excerpts are thus essentially an example of “a text that is a link in a chain of texts, reacting to, drawing in, and transforming” (Sunderland 2004, 30) these other scriptural source texts. Therefore, polemical and dialogic relations (Wodak and Rheindorf 2017, 30) between the Qurʾān and Judeo-Christian sacred texts are a key dimension of the structure and content of Qurʾānic narratives. Indeed as Lassner (1993) has demonstrated, these polemic and dialogic relations occurred within a broader practice of cross-cultural borrowing between the Muslim and Jewish traditions, where both sought to better understand their own scripture through investigating the other’s scripture.

This chapter entails a critical comparison between the Qurʾānic telling of the Solomon narrative with its Hebrew biblical counterpart. In this regard, I will first present an overview of the Solomon narrative as a whole in the Hebrew Bible and the Qurʾān. This overview will identify where and how the narratives are located in scripture and will present a thematic analysis of what is considered important in both scriptures. I will then hone in on the excerpts that recount the Queen of Sheba’s meeting with Solomon in both versions of the story. This is because the meeting with the Queen constitutes an essential part of the Qurʾānic version of the narrative. Lassner correctly points out that with time, there is much to this narrative that “shall never be recovered” for the benefit of the modern reader and so it is essential that we make use of “religious, belletrist, and historical texts that shed light, however dim at times, on the distant past” of the Solomonic era (Lassner 1993, 6). A basic frequencies analysis shows that 27% of the total number of these verses is solely about David; 9% are about both Solomon and David; 29.5% are about Solomon only; 32% are about the Queen of Sheba and 9% are about the people of Saba’. In other words, the Queen and people of Sheba are afforded roughly the same number of Qurʾānic discursive space as these two important Prophetic agents. She thus cannot be overlooked.

This will be done using Van Leeuwen’s Social Actors Approach (SAA, Van Leeuwen 2008), a linguistically oriented, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

perspective. The findings will be interpreted in light of the Qur'ān's para-narrative aims of narrating to understand how and why the various elements of the Qur'ānic narrative have been constructed and presented in the way they have been.

The chief underlying reason for using SAA as opposed to any other critical discourse studies or discourse analytical approach for my study lies in the comprehensive, critical, socio-semantic, and pan-semiotic² categories provided by the approach, which are informed primarily by both sociological and linguistic theories from the work of Halliday (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 82; Wodak and Meyer 2009, 26, 34). The categories allow for a systematic and therefore retroductable analysis.³ The SAA seeks to draw up a socio-semantic inventory of how social actors can be represented in discourse using specific linguistic and rhetorical realizations (Van Leeuwen 1996, 32–34). Because meanings are understood to belong to culture rather than to language, the framework applies to any language (Van Leeuwen 1996, 33) including classical Arabic as in this case.

According to Van Leeuwen, because "representations are understood to be ultimately based on practice"; it is the primacy of practice that constitutes the theoretical core of this particular framework (Van Leeuwen 1995, 82). The notion of individual actors permanently constituting and reproducing social structure is linked to a Foucauldian notion of discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 27). The core of social action is formed by action and the participants are involved in social action in their capacity as instigators, agents, affected, or beneficiaries (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 92–94). Moreover, the approach also considers the context of social action or "performance indicators" (time, place, tools and materials, dress and grooming, eligibility criteria, and so forth) to be an important aspect of the analysis of social action (Van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 92–94), thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of social actors and social action.

The framework also allows us to differentiate between social actors on grounds of gender and social groups and individual actors, which can be diagnostic. We can therefore identify, track, and trace similarities and differences between the nominal representation of male actors vs. female actors, protagonists vs. peripheral actors, and individuals vs. social groups. Moreover, by differentiating between actors concerning their roles as agents and or affected

2 This means that the SAA recognizes that different cultures have different ways of representing the social world and hence have different ways of mapping the different semiotics onto this range.

3 By retroductable, I mean that if the same analysis was implemented again or by a different researcher, the same set of results would be produced.

entities, the approach allows us to understand power dynamics and hierarchies between actors more clearly.

The vast inventory of categories used to depict social actors in a range of ways compels us to think “outside of the box” about social actors and how their different social, religious, and relational functions and identities shape and impact the type of social actions they are represented as carrying out. Importantly, the notion of appraisal is also very important in terms of delineating how social actors are evaluated, judged, and discursively represented—how, by whom, and in what way (positive or negative). On a meso-level, this is connected to the ideas of legitimation and delegitimation of certain social practices. Similarly, the categories of association and assimilation vs. differentiation are also key in marking out us vs. them group configurations within the Qur’ānic text. Collectively, the vast range of categories build up a complex, nuanced, and highly subjective/individualized picture of every social actor, by highlighting the different facets of social actor identities from various angles, enabling us to “get to know” key male and female social actors. What this means is that by using this method, we can better understand who the role models for emulation are, what is “emulatable” and what is delegitimized in these Qur’ānic men and women.

2 Exegetical Understandings of Solomon’s Meeting with the Queen in the Muslim *Tafsīr* Tradition

Before I go on to analyze the narrative excerpts using this discourse approach, it might be useful to first understand how this narrative has been understood within the Muslim exegetical tradition. In the *tafsīrs*, the Queen of Sheba is identified as Bilqīs bint Sharāḥīl ibn Mālik ibn Rayyān. Her mother, according to Ibn Kathīr’s (d. 774/1373) report is Fāri’a, from the *jinn*. Bilqīs ruled over a highly populated vast kingdom in Yemen (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:186). Al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) explains that the reason why the Queen’s existence had been made unknown to Solomon, despite only living relatively close by, was due to God’s *maṣlaḥa* (divine reasoning), in the same way that Yūsuf’s whereabouts had been made unknown to his father, Ya’qūb (al-Zamakhsharī 2009, 3:781). In this section, I will briefly explore four main central themes from Solomon’s meeting with the Queen, as explored by al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210), al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) and Ibn Kathīr. These key themes are Solomon’s letter to the Queen; Bilqīs’s throne and its acquisition by Solomon and their meeting at the Glass Palace.

2.1 *The Letter*

Upon learning about the Queen’s existence, her vast kingdom and magnificent throne, and more disconcertingly, her problematic choice of religion (sun-worship) by his chief bird, Hudhud (Hoopoe), by way of ascertaining the truth of the bird’s statement, Solomon writes the Queen a letter. The letter was delivered by Hudhud in the Queen’s personal chamber, at a time when she was alone. Upon finding and reading the letter, the Queen is shocked and surprised and orders her government officials, nobles, and statesmen to gather for a meeting (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:188). During the meeting, she discusses the “noble letter” (Q 27:29) that she has been sent. Al-Rāzī explains that the letter was noble because of the nobility and excellence of its subject matter, it was sent by a noble king and as such it was sealed properly (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:194). Al-Zamakhsharī also adds that the letter was scented in musk and like the letter of all prophets of God; it was short and to the point as opposed to being unnecessarily lengthy (al-Zamakhsharī 2009, 3:782). Ibn Kathīr continues that it reflected the pinnacle of clarity and *balāgha* (rhetoric) (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:188). Moreover, prior to Solomon, no one had written the *basmala* in a letter. The letter reads as follows: Lo! it is from Solomon, and lo! it is: In the name of Allāh, the Beneficent, the Merciful; Exalt not yourselves against me, but come unto me as those who surrender (Q 27:30–31). Al-Rāzī explains that by “do not exalt yourself,” Solomon meant that do not transgress by following the desires of the lower self and show pride and arrogance like all other kings (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:195). Ibn Kathīr adds “do not resist” to this list of possible meanings (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:189). Concerning “come to me,” Ibn Kathīr elaborates that by this, Solomon meant them to come to him as monotheists, sincere believers, and obedient (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:189). This is corroborated by the explanations of al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī too (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:195; al-Zamakhsharī 2009).

2.2 *The Throne*

Bilqīs’s famous and magnificent throne was according to the exegetes, a splendid sight. It was enormous in size, located on the highest and innermost part of her palace, raised on pillars, and enclosed within seven other palaces, each locked by a huge door, making it very difficult to access. It was made of gold and studded with the rarest most precious jewels and pearls, and it was surrounded by hundreds of maids who served the Queen. Every morning and evening, the Queen and her people would face towards the throne and prostrate to the sun (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:187). Whilst Ibn Kathīr is intrigued by the design and location of the throne (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:191–192), al-Rāzī and al-Zamakhsharī on the other hand are more perturbed by Hudhud’s description of the Queen’s throne

and Allāh's throne using almost the same set of words (al-Zamakhsharī 2009, 3:781). Thus, their concern in explaining this part of the narrative is differentiating between Hudhud's meanings when referring to the Queen's throne. The Queen's throne according to them is indeed magnificent when compared to the thrones of all other kings, whereas Allāh's throne is magnificent in relation to His creation of all that exists in the Heavens and the Earth (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:190). In other words, for the exegetes, drawing out this marked difference was theologically motivated.

2.3 *Acquiring the Queen's Throne*

Accessing the Queen's throne constitutes an important and well-discussed part of all the commentaries examined. The chief amongst these concerns clearly relates to understanding Solomon's motivations for acquiring the throne in the first place. According to al-Zamakhsharī, Solomon wanted to demonstrate to the Queen the mysteries of his special God-given powers by showing how her most precious possession, the throne, which was within the seventh innermost palace, protected by lock after lock was still easy for him to access and take. Ibn Kathīr corroborates this view and adds that Solomon wanted to show her the vast diversity of beings in his army, such that none before or after him would ever possess (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:192). The acquisition of the throne was his *hujja* (proof) over her in relation to proving the legitimacy of his prophethood. Al-Rāzī, adds to these plausible reasons by adding that Solomon knew that the Queen would come to visit him, and he thus wanted to test the Queen's intellectual ability to discern and recognize her throne after it had been significantly altered. It may also have been to determine the extent of her powers and kingdom prior to meeting her (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:197). An interesting point mentioned by all the exegetes is that it was important for Solomon to take this throne before the Queen's conversion to Islam, as after Islam, her wealth and property would become forbidden for him to take (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:197).

There is a clear difference of opinion amongst the exegetes in relation to who actually took the throne. Ibn Kathīr clearly prefers the opinion that Aṣif ibn Barkhiyā, Solomon's chief minister, an honest man who knew *al-ism al-a'zam* (God's greatest name), was the one to bring Solomon the throne (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:192; al-Zamakhsharī 2009, 3:784). Al-Rāzī, on the other hand, puts forward a list of possible human and non-human beings, such as Jibrīl, a specific angel assigned to Solomon by God, Khiḍr, Aṣif ibn Barkhiyā, a man from the desert who came to visit Solomon that day and lastly, Solomon himself (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:197). Al-Rāzī argues that Solomon himself instantly acquired the throne of the Queen as a way of responding to the *'ifrīt* (stalwart) who offered to bring it to him by the end of the meeting, by demonstrating the

miracles associated with him and his greater power. He argues that had Āṣif or any other being accessed the throne, it would have made Solomon appear vulnerable or less powerful than those he was ruling over. Moreover, it was more plausible that he, being a prophet of God, had knowledge of the book and God's names (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:197–198).

Once the throne was brought before Solomon—or before the congregation—he ordered his nobles to alter its features, in a significant way, by way of testing the Queen's intellectual capabilities. As such, Ibn Kathīr points out that the colors were changed, it was increased in some aspects of design and reduced in others, it was turned inside out and upside down (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:194). The exegetes agree that despite these significant alterations, the Queen exhibited steadfastness in her judgment, perfect intellectual discernment, and foresight (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:194). Nevin Reda thus rightly points out that the Queen of Sheba "must have been an intelligent woman" and "one who was difficult to trick." Solomon's strategy of taking her throne "worked because it appealed to her point of strength, that is, her ability to make wise decisions" (Hassan 2020, 134).

2.4 *The Meeting at the Palace*

Ibn Kathīr explains that Solomon had heard a great deal about the Queen's beauty and magnificence. When the *jinn* found out about his interest in her, by way of preventing his marriage/union with her, they circulated rumors about her intellectual deficiency and the fact that she had hairy legs and feet that looked like that of a donkey. This was because she was the offspring of a *jinn* parent herself (her mother), and they did not want her to give birth to another half-human child. According to al-Qurṭubī, Solomon had an advisor from the *jinn* who advised him to build a glass palace in order to trick her into revealing her legs and feet. Al-Zamakhsharī corroborates this and adds that Solomon took her throne and had it altered to test her intellectual soundness and had the glass palace built to see the state of her legs and feet for himself (al-Zamakhsharī 2009, 3:784, 785).

Thus, a magnificent glass palace was built prior to her arrival, upon running water. Fish and other aquatic creatures were put under the clear, glass flooring and were clearly visible. Her throne was placed in the center of the palace. Solomon was seated on her throne, with *jinn* and human attendants standing around him, and birds hovering above him. This was to get the Queen to show him the greatest degree of respect and honor, on account of his steadfastness in religion and legitimate prophet-cum-king status.

Hassan correctly points out that despite the clearly positive image of the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'ān, the exegetes "fail to note the liberal

gender-egalitarian content” of the narrative (Hassan 2020, 134), concerning themselves at times with unnecessary details. So, “while the Qur’ānic text praises the Queen of Sheba, and shows her exceptional abilities as a leader, traditional interpretations convey a different message, one that identifies doubts about a woman’s ability to lead” (Hassan 2020, 134). So, upon being requested to enter the palace, the Queen mistakenly perceived the glass floor to be running water, so she lifted her skirt and here, the exegetes differ over what Solomon saw. All the exegetes in question agree that the Queen revealed perfectly formed legs and feet. However, Ibn Kathīr and al-Qurṭubī go on to elaborate that the Queen’s legs were hairy and that this was put down to the fact that she was unmarried (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:195; al-Qurṭubī 1935, 16:175) and so she did not need to beautify herself. He thus ordered the *jinn* to invent a hair-removal instrument and thus, she became the first for whom a razor was invented. Nevertheless, they all agree that coming to visit Solomon at the Glass Palace was what led the Queen to embrace the monotheistic faith of Solomon. Upon her conversion, Solomon and all present are said to have prostrated to Allāh, out of joy and gratitude (Ibn Kathīr 1999, 6:195). The Queen’s conversion was no small matter for it meant that potentially, her whole nation would follow suit.

In the aftermath of her conversion, al-Qurṭubī and al-Zamakhsharī point out that Solomon and the Queen got married and she returned to her kingdom in Yemen. Solomon would visit her once a month for three days (al-Zamakhsharī 2009, 3:785). Al-Qurṭubī argues that she bore him a son called Dāwūd, who died during Solomon’s lifetime (al-Qurṭubī 1935, 16:175). Other exegetes like al-Rāzī argue that she got married to a king called Hamdān (al-Rāzī 1985, 24:201).

Having briefly examined the Muslim *tafsīr* tradition by way of understanding how this narrative has been read through the lens of some Muslim scholars over the centuries, I shall now go on to examine the narrative excerpts from the Solomon narrative, as they appear in the translated version of the Hebrew Bible as well as in the original Arabic, Qur’ānic version.

3 Dispersal Analysis

The story of Solomon (and David) comprises a key part of the overall collection of narratives in both the Qur’ān and the Hebrew Bible. In the Bible, Solomon’s story is related over two main books: the *Book of Kings* and *Chronicles*. It consists of over 700 verses. Apart from these, there are also various other references to Solomon throughout the Old Testament. The references to Solomon

in the Bible are thus much more elaborate, frequent, and detailed than they are in the Qur'ān. Whilst frequencies do not shed any light on the context, power, or impact of an occurrence, they do provide one useful way of investigating the extent to which characters are represented and which themes and motifs are considered to be significant, which can therefore be diagnostic from a CDA point of view (Van Leeuwen 1995, 85).

The story of Solomon and David is related in fragmentary form, in excerpts that are relatively short in length and are dispersed across the Qur'ānic text. The very first mention of Solomon as it appears in the *muṣḥaf*, appears as a free-standing verse in Q 2:102. The para-narrative agenda of this verse is defensive and vindictory as it seeks to refute the validity of allegations of sorcery and disbelief leveled at Solomon after his death. The verse's message is fore-grounded because it stands alone and sets the agenda for recounting the Solomon narrative in the rest of the Qur'ān. In fact, on a different occasion, the *jinn*'s knowledge of the unseen realm is further refuted in Q 34:14, in which God states that "the *jinn* saw plainly that if they had known the unseen, they would not have tarried in the humiliating penalty (of their task)" which Solomon had decreed for them. Thus, reinforcing the divinely originating nature of all his forms of empowerment and refuting any kind of inappropriate connection to the dark world of magic remain tied ultimately to the central theme of *tawḥīd*—a foregrounded, theological para-narrative agenda of the Qur'ānic telling of the story.

Towards the latter part of the second *sūra*, we then have six verses strung together which recount how David acquired his kingship after defeating Goliath. God's promise to the Israelites, in relation to David's rule, is also marked in these verses with glad tidings of receiving the Ark of the Covenant "wherein is peace of reassurance from your Lord" (Q 2:248). David's rule would thus prove successful for the Children of Israel.

These verses are then followed by a string of four free-standing verses found in *sūra* 4, 5, 6, and 17 of the Qur'ān, all of which emphasize the prophetic status of both Solomon and David. They are thus represented in these verses as having been inspired by God and exalted in station over many other prophets (Q 4:163). David's reception of the Psalms has also been repeated twice (Q 6:48 and 17:55). The para-narrative agenda of representing them as valid prophetic agents in addition to their well-known divinely authorized kingship is clearly emphasized in these verses, more so due to their structural location within the Qur'ānic text as free-standing verses.

These freestanding verses are then followed by a string of five verses in *sūra* 21 (and similar ones in *sūra* 34) which briefly recount the divinely originating resources granted to both father and son which made them competent

and divinely validated prophet-cum-kings, such as wisdom, discernment, and knowledge. Intriguingly, each of these verses ends with a reminder to the reader of God's constant supervision, backing, and support behind the numerous extraordinary powers and resources made accessible to them both. There are a couple of these verses in *sūra* 34 too (Q 34:10–14). In this regard, we have phrases like “and We were witnesses to their judgment” (Q 21:78); “And We made Solomon understand (the case)” (Q 21:79); and “for be sure I see (clearly) all that ye do” (Q 34:11). In relation to David's command over the birds and the hills: “We [God] were the doers (thereof)” (Q 21:79). Of Solomon's command over the winds “And of everything We are Aware” (Q 21:81). Elsewhere, other Qur'ānic references to God's constant support comprise how the *jinn* were under his command “by the leave of his Lord and if any of them were to disobey him it was God Himself [who] made him [jinn] taste of the penalty of the blazing fire” (Q 34:12). The purpose behind these reminders is clearly to demonstrate that Solomon's extraordinary powers were not only of divine origin but that God played an active role in sustaining and maintaining his matchless sovereignty, because he was a Prophetic agent.

Then in *sūra* 27, al-Naml (The Ant), we find the lengthiest narrative excerpt recounting Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba. It is 29 verses long and stands as a coherent narrative entity. It is this excerpt that will inform the bulk of the analysis for this chapter (other verses will be alluded to where relevant). Solomon's encounter with the Queen of Sheba features in both scriptural texts. However, there are significant differences in the accounts. The Queen of Sheba constitutes a significant proportion of the Solomon story in the Qur'an. In the Bible, she is devoted a short section in the Book of Kings. This excerpt is repeated almost verbatim in *Chronicles*. Each excerpt is 13 verses long and largely recounts her meeting with Solomon.

On the other hand, in the Qur'an, the Solomon story is narrated in full in Q 27, al-Naml, over a stretch of 29 verses: 27:15–44 of which 25–29 are based on the Queen of Sheba. Given the significant number of verses about the Queen of Sheba and her people elsewhere in the Qur'an, what could be a para-narrative priority might actually be to present Solomon's encounter with her in a different light to the one presented in the Bible. The central Qur'ānic excerpt that recounts Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba foregrounds Solomon's prophetic status alongside his kingship. The most important theme running through the entirety of the excerpt is *tawhīd*.

The theme of divine empowerment continues in the following excerpt of 11 verses in *sūra* 34, from which the first 4 verses explore David and Solomon's many favors of divine empowerment (*faḍl*). The remaining 7 explore how God had blessed the people of Saba' and how they turned away in disbelief

and ingratitude and so were made to face punishment from God (Q 34:15–21). Neuwirth refers to such narratives as "retribution legends" (Neuwirth 2006, 105).

The final references to Solomon and David in the Qur'ān can be found in *sūra* 38, over a stretch of 21 verses. Here, the first ten verses continue the recurring theme of recounting the story of David and how God had blessed him in various ways. It also recounts how God tested him. The remaining 11 verses recount the story of Solomon. It also describes how God tested him and explores the extraordinary forms of divine empowerment he benefited from and received during his life. This *sūra* sheds light on a rather important dimension of Solomon and David's careers as prophets-cum-kings. Here, God recounts some apparent "lapses" in their moral praxis. Therefore, Solomon's distraction from the remembrance of God as a consequence of viewing light-footed horses (Q 38:32) and David's metaphorical taking of his brother's only ewe (Q 38:24) construe father and son as fallible prophetic agents. However, despite being momentarily distracted from the remembrance of God by the "good things of the world" (Q 38:32) and being momentarily beguiled by his [David] desire (Q 38:26) they nevertheless represent excellent exemplars of continuously turning back to God in gratitude and repentance. There are hence numerous Qur'ānic verse references to David and Solomon's gratitude to God (Q 27:15, 27:19, 27:36, and 27:40) as God Himself tries them to see if they are thankful or not (Q 34:13). There are also frequent Qur'ānic references to David and Solomon's repentance (Q 38:17–35). The central point, however, is that it is their repentance and continuous turning back to God that "saves" them in the end. Thus, we have a critical appraisal of both prophetic agents in the Qur'ān. It is these qualities of theirs that are frequently emphasized in the Qur'ān as invoking God's grace, forgiveness, and exaltation. Therefore, they are presented in the Qur'ān as acclaimed role models for emulation for believing men and women.

4 Thematic Analysis

In the biblical telling of the narrative, the central themes of the Solomon story are: Solomon's acquisition of the throne; his dedication and commitment to building the Temple of the Lord; his splendor, riches, and extraordinary kingdom; his mighty rule and worldwide fame for his wisdom and knowledge. There appear to be significantly more references to Solomon's splendor in the Bible than in the Qur'ān. In the Bible, he is depicted as enjoying for his own sake whereas in the Qur'ān he is represented as holding disdain for the opulent gifts sent from the Queen on account of already having wealth and power like

no other king living before or after him (Q 38:35). As such he is depicted as not letting it overcome him (Q 27:36).

There are also frequent references to his passion for building palaces and other things. 42% of all references to Solomon in the Bible recount his many grandeur plans and architectural genius in relation to building palaces and temples. It took him 7 years to complete the temple of the Lord (1 Kings 6:38) and almost twice that time to build his own royal palace (1 Kings 7:1). He also built a palace for his wife, the pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 7:8), and terraces for his wives and temples for their gods (1 Kings 11:7). In the Qur'ān, there are occasional references to his construction work, such as the glass palace which he shows the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:44) and another reference to his passion for building palaces (Q 34:14). Whilst these confirm what is expounded in the Bible, any explicit mention of the building of the temple is absent in the Qur'ān, as are his other many building projects in various villages as enumerated in the Bible (1 Kings 9). The building of the temple is significant in the Bible and references to it constitute a third of the total references to Solomon in the book of *Kings* and *Chronicles*. It goes without saying of course that even today he is best known for the Temple of Solomon. Although there are numerous verses describing Solomon's sources of divine empowerment, in the Bible, these are largely connected to material wealth and worldwide riches which he is depicted as receiving in large quantities (1 Kings 3). It is connected to his extraordinary kingdom—both in size and scope as well as what he was able to achieve during his forty-year reign. At some level, his acquisition of these material riches is also connected to his well-sought-after wisdom and knowledge which kings and leaders came to benefit from, bringing with them generous gifts each time (1 Kings 4:34). The Queen of Sheba is also depicted as partaking in this latter practice.

But in the Qur'ān, we are presented with a very different picture. The sources of divine empowerment (*tafḍīl*) are clearly identified, and described in greater detail and more frequently than in the Bible. Importantly, these sources go beyond material wealth, riches, and even cognitive abilities like wisdom and insight as enumerated in the Bible. They explicitly denote mastery over the earth's elements, natural resources, and its creatures. Moreover, Solomon's empowerment is derived from God, not from other kings and Queens who are drawn to him on account of his wisdom and knowledge (1 Kings 4:34). In fact, verses recounting the empowerment of both David and Solomon constitute a significant proportion of all references to Solomon in the Qur'ānic telling of the story. 54% of all references to the story of Solomon recount the various extraordinary means of divine empowerment of David, such as having control over the birds (Q 34:10, 38:19, 21:79); hills and mountains (Q 34:10, 38:18, 21:79);

iron was made soft for him so that he could build armor for battle (Q 34:10; 21:80); an abundance of wealth (Q 27:16); knowledge and wisdom from God to judge rightly amongst the people (Q 27:15, 2:251, 21:79) and of course, prophethood (Q 38:26); kingship (Q 2:246–2:251) as well as exaltation over many prophetic agents and kings (Q 17:55, 2:253, 27:15).

Similarly, Solomon is represented as having control over the winds (Q 21:81, 34:12, 38:36); knows the languages of birds Q 27:16, 27:22–28, animals, and insects (Q 27:18); possesses control over people as well as the *jinn* (Q 21:82, 34:12–13, 38:37); possesses extensive knowledge (Q 27:15, 21:79) and wisdom (Q 21:78–79); control over iron (Q 34:12); is honored with prophethood (Q 2:253; 4:63); has an abundance of all things (Q 27:16, 27:36, 38:31); owns a matchless army (Q 27:17–18, 27:37) and a unique sovereignty (Q 38:35).

Incidentally, the Queen of Sheba is also depicted as receiving divine empowerment as is clearly implicated in Q 27:23 "and she hath been given (abundance) of all things" in addition to possessing a magnificent throne (Q 27:23, 27:38), an abundance of material wealth (Q 27:23, 27:36) and a mighty army (Q 27:33).

In the Qur'ānic telling there is a huge emphasis on the extent of God's divine empowerment of both Solomon and David, through the frequency of descriptions of extraordinary powers and blessings. The frequent construal of God's *tafdīl* and divine backing or support of Solomon and David was strategically important in countering allegations of sorcery and magic against Solomon. Where Solomon is depicted as getting the *jinn* to help him in his various projects: military expeditions (Q 27:17); to bring him the throne of Sheba (Q 27:39); building projects (Q 21:82, 34:12, 34:13, 38:37, 34:14); diving for pearls and other treasures in the ocean (Q 38:37, 21:82) as well as other work. Implied in these references are phrases explicitly stating that Solomon's power over the *jinn* was by the leave of God (Q 34:12) and that He, was ever watchful and witness to all that Solomon and David did (Q 34:11). His divine backing and support were not limited to empowering them through various means, but entailed constant supervision, guidance, and checking to ensure it was used for the correct purposes.

Other important themes in the biblical telling include his righteousness and wholehearted devotion to God—at least for the main part of his rule (1 Kings 8). However, the percentages of these verses are higher in the Qur'ān (18%) compared to the Bible (11%). As such, alongside building the Temple of the Lord (1 Kings 6) and having an eye to detail for every part of the Temple's construction and decor (1 Kings 7:13–51), and reinstating the Ark of the Covenant (1 Kings 8), he is represented as generously and frequently offering sacrifices to God (1 Kings 8:62–66, 9:25, 3:4, 15; 1 Chronicles 29:21, 1:3 and so forth). God's encounter with Solomon, via *wahy* (divine revelation) is not described in detail

in the Qur'ān as it is in the Bible (2 Chronicles 1:7–12, 7:12–22). However, there are numerous references to his being a righteous man of God (Q 27:15, 38:30, 6:84, 27:19). *Tawhīd* is thus a central theme in both tellings. There are frequent references to Solomon's great sacrifices to God, their generosity and frequency and acceptance by God in the Bible, but merely a passing verse in Q 34:13 in which such actions are implicated in the form of "basins as large as reservoirs, and (cooking) cauldrons fixed (in their places)," albeit, the purpose is to reinforce his power over the *jinn*—not his frequent and generous sacrificial rituals. In the Bible, Solomon's practice of burning incense when sacrificing to God is implied as looked down upon—possibly because it seems to imitate the polytheists/idol worshippers of his time, e.g., his wives who did this when offering sacrifices to their gods (1 Kings 9:24).

However, despite repeated counsels and reminders from his father David (1 Kings 2:2–4) and God, Himself (1 Kings 3:10–14, 6:11–13), who spoke to him twice, towards the latter part of his life, Solomon is represented in the Bible, as no longer fully devoted to God as David, his father had been (1 Kings 11:1–11). On account of his love for his wives, some of whom were idol worshippers, Solomon left the way of his father and became an idol worshipper. There are thus frequent references to Solomon worshipping idols in the Bible (1 Kings 9:6, 9). God thus became angry and destroyed his kingdom and the Temple very soon after his death. In the Bible, God is depicted as bringing about Solomon's downfall by raising adversaries against him. This is by way of punishing him for worshipping other gods. In the same way that he became David's heir through the help of prophet Nathan, his adversaries are helped by prophet Ahijah and are given the kingdom in his stead after his death (1 Kings 11:25). It is, however, delayed till later his death, because of God's love and appreciation of David's righteousness (1 Kings 11:37–39).

Apart from Q 38:34, which Muslim exegetes have long grappled with and put forward various contentious interpretations that they have drawn from *isrā'iliyyāt* material, in the Qur'ān, Solomon is almost always depicted as an upright, righteous man of God who seeks to bring others (the Queen and her people) to the monotheistic religion of God. In the Muslim exegetical sources, as part of their interpretation of this ambiguous verse Q 38:34, Solomon is depicted as either committing a wrong on account of instructing the *jinn* to build a life-size idol of her father for one of his idolatrous wives; seeking help from magicians instead of God for his chronic illness; seeing an image of his own life-less body resting on his throne or being tested for forgetting to say if-God-wills in his quest to impregnate all his wives and concubines so that they can all give birth to sons who will go on to fight alongside him in the path of God. In contrast to the biblical account where he appears to slip away from the path of David, in

the Qur'ānic account, Solomon, though not completely faultless, is nevertheless portrayed as constantly turning back to God in repentance over his faults and expressing gratitude for all his blessings.

In many ways the biblical account is an implicit condemnation of Solomon: God gave him so much and yet, despite of this, he too was overcome by human weaknesses. It was a woman who is depicted as bringing him down (Nehemiah 13:26). He is the reason for the destruction of the Israelites and the ultimate destruction of the temple and the Ark of the Covenant (1 Kings 9: 7–9). Thus, in the Bible, we have the story of the rise and fall of a great king. Solomon's transgression is a theme that cannot be negated in the biblical telling. The full breadth of his story is recounted in the Bible: beginning with his birth to the destruction of his kingdom shortly after his death. Solomon's prophetic status is neither implicitly nor explicitly alluded to in the Bible as prophecy is understood differently in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Although there are references both to his kingship and to his being a man of God in both the Qur'ān and the Bible, in the Qur'ān, it is his prophet status that is emphasized and foregrounded as an inextricable dimension of his role as divinely authorized king.

In what is to now follow, I will critically examine and compare Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'ānic and biblical versions of the narrative using Van Leeuwen's Social Actors Approach. The motivation for doing so is to unpack how Solomon and the Queen have been represented in both telling so that we can deduce from these construals, what are the plausible para-narrative aims behind the Qur'ānic telling.

5 Construal of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'ān and Hebrew Bible

Not only do Qur'ānic narratives shape consciousness and perception, but they also guide action. Young maintains that the world's sacred texts are "potent sources of inspiration and behaviour" (Young 1993, xii; see also Clifford Geertz, cited in Stowasser 1994, 4). One such paradigm of faith is the "lessons the Qur'ān imparts to the believers by way of narratives and legislation on its female characters" (Stowasser 1994, 4). As such, "people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories" derived from socially circulating religious narratives such as those of the Qur'ān *and* the Bible (Lawler 2002, 250). Lawler argues that "public narratives are powerful in structuring the kinds of things which can be said (and, conversely, foreclosing certain kinds of story)" (Lawler 2002, 250). As such,

“certain things become ‘saturated with meaning’ and thus symbolize/resonate with public narratives thereby constructing coherence between personal and public narratives” (Lawler 2002, 252). This is because people “inevitably construct their identities ... by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories” (Lawler 2002, 252). In this way, not only do actual believers experience their various identities through the vehicle of Qur’ānic narrative, but they also seek to construct their identities based upon the blueprints provided by the prophetic role models for emulation, whose lives and experiences are explored in detail throughout the Qur’ānic text. Subsequently, it is important that we investigate what kind of ideas, actions, attributions, and inspiration are “saturated with [gendered/gendering] meaning” within these narratives to theorize their potential sexual-textual impact on the lives of actual believing men and women. This is particularly important in the case of female Qur’ānic characters like the Queen of Sheba who is not only presented as enjoying equality with men, but is depicted as personally empowered and as a political authority in her own right (Bauer 2009, 638).

Subsequently, this section entails a critical exploration of the various ways in which Solomon and the Queen of Sheba have been identified in the two tellings of the Solomon narrative using Van Leeuwen’s Social Actor categories of nomination,⁴ functionalization,⁵ “identification,”⁶ “relational identification,”⁷ “personalization,”⁸ “impersonalization,” “association,”⁹ “assimilation,”¹⁰ “exaltation”¹¹ and “differentiation.”¹² In addition to these, the excerpts will

4 Nomination refers to how social actors have been named.

5 Functionalization refers to how social actors have been identified by recourse to the occupational roles or functions that they carry out in society, e.g., king, teacher, doctor, etc.

6 Identification refers to other forms of representing social actors through other means such as by recourse to one’s religion, e.g., a Muslim man, a Hindu woman, and so forth.

7 Relational identification refers to representing social actors by recourse to their kinship or intimate relations, e.g., Pharaoh’s wife.

8 This refers to whether social actors have been depicted personally as individuals, e.g., Solomon, or impersonally as The King.

9 This refers to denoting a link or point of connection between one actor and another, one group and another.

10 This category refers to construing social actors as part of a social group, e.g., She became part of the Avon family recently.

11 This refers to the phenomenon of constructing a hierarchical construct whereby one social actor or social group is depicted as superior or exalted over another.

12 Differentiation refers to highlighting what is different about a social actor, e.g., She was a sun worshipper. Often this constructs an Us vs. Them binary opposition in the text which can carry ideological undertones that denote the superiority of one social group over another.

also be explored from the perspective of appraisal.¹³ Each telling will be explored in turn, first to draw inter-narrative comparisons between the two tellings of the narrative.

5.1 *Naming and Identification*

Noticeably, we can detect a stringent naming mechanism operating, which means that only divine/prophetic agents are actually represented by their "unique identity" (Van Leeuwen 2008, 52). Solomon and David are named. We can detect a similar mechanism in place in the biblical telling of the story too, as here only Solomon is actually named. As the central protagonist of his stories in the scriptural texts, identifying Solomon in this way denotes a sense of familiarity with the audiences of these texts as well as honing attention on his person.

5.2 *Categorization*

In the functional categorization of actors, what is notable is that while the Queen of Sheba refers to Solomon as a King (Q 27:34), he does not reciprocate this title for the Queen. Instead, he always refers to her collectively, as a part of the people of Sheba using third-person plural forms of address such as "them," "their," "those" and so forth (Q 27:36–37). A plausible explanation for this is that it is not her status as a legitimate Queen that Solomon finds troubling; rather, it is the collective state of disbelief that he finds disconcerting.

Moreover, Hoopoe (Solomon's bird) refers to her as "a woman" who is ruling over them (people of Sheba) (Q 27:23), using a simplistic, gendered classification when reporting back to Solomon, which may reflect the novelty of having a female monarch in that particular socio-cultural context. Her functional role as a monarch is thus implicated in this formulation. Here functionalisation is salient in depicting both actors as leaders of their people.

Apart from frequent nominal references to Solomon, in the Bible, both he and the Queen have been identified via functional honorifics such as "King Solomon," "the King" and "the Queen of Sheba" or "the Queen." These forms of identification help to locate Solomon as the focal protagonist of the narrative, while establishing the authoritative role of both monarchs. Thus, similar patterns of identification occur in both texts. Some modern feminist scholars have taken the Queen's Qur'anic depiction as a legitimate and powerful leader to not only resist the aversion of classical and modern exegetes to female political leadership, but also to argue in favor of female agency and leadership more broadly (Jalalzai 2021, 211).

13 This refers to how social actors have been evaluated, positively or negatively in a text.

5.3 *Other Forms of Categorisation*

5.3.1 Association

In direct opposition to the Bible, where in which the Queen's visit is motivated by curiosity to see for herself all that she had heard about him (1 Kings 10:7), and a desire to benefit from Solomon's wisdom (Matthew 12:42), in the Qur'anic telling of the encounter, the meeting between both monarchs is purely largely religious on Solomon's side (Q 27:27) although political domination is implied and largely political on the Queen's side (to protect herself and her people against Solomon's invasion) (Q 27:34). Solomon is not disconcerted by hearing about the existence of a powerful female monarch: what he does find disconcerting is rather her state of disbelief (Q 27:24–28). Solomon's letter to the Queen on the surface appears to be aggressive in its message of political surrender: "Exalt not yourselves against me but come unto me as those who surrender" (Q 27:31). However, the inclusion of the *basmala* (in the name of Allāh, the most merciful, the most beneficent) at the beginning of the letter sets the tone for the unfolding message as being connected to a higher purpose, one that is inextricably in line with his *tawhīdīc* (monotheistic) mission to encourage the Queen to come to him as "those who surrender" not to him but to the Deity who is fore-grounded in the letter. Thereby, it problematizes the idea of Solomon's message as being purely political. As such, his apparently threatening invocation to "[E]xalt not yourselves against me" can now be reinterpreted as a compassionate entreaty on his part, to prevent unnecessary shame and abasement (Q 27:37). In the Bible, Solomon is depicted as confidently and competently impressing the Queen with his knowledge, wisdom and splendor (1 Kings 10:4–7). The Queen's faith in the God of Solomon is implicated in the use of the definite article before Lord in "the Lord" which is repeated twice in her declaration:

Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.

1 Kings 10:9

The use of "association" in the opening verse of the excerpt "his relationship to the Lord" (1 Kings 10:1) denotes that part of Solomon's fame lay in his acclaimed status as a man of God. Perhaps this is why she had come to hear his wisdom and see his wealth for herself. Indeed, she is overwhelmed by his wisdom and riches. She is convinced by what she has seen and her confidence in Solomon and the Lord's wisdom is reinforced and strengthened.

Interestingly, in the Qur'ānic version of the Solomon narrative, we find that the most dominant form of actor categorization is religious classification. Here, the good, rational, monotheistic religion of Solomon is pitched against the misguided sun-worshipping religion of the Queen of Sheba and her people, in a binary construction that implies that both protagonists are metonymically used as figureheads of their respective religions. Importantly however, this is not done to degrade the Queen and her people; rather it is done to emphasize the purity of Solomon's intentions in propagating God's religion to the Queen, by problematizing their misguided choice of faith, thereby underscoring his genuine prophetic status.

5.3.2 Assimilation

Solomon and David relationally identify themselves as belonging to the group of "His believing servants" (Q 27:15). Solomon further identifies himself as striving to become one of God's "pious servants" (Q 27:19). In addition, he describes himself as already "having submitted" to God (Q 27:42). Collectively, these reflect and underscore his commitment to the religion of God. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān, he is positively appraised by God as "How excellent a slave!" (Q 38:30), and as having "favor" with God "and a happy journey's end" (Q 38:40), thereby reinforcing his status as a genuine righteous man of God.

Later, the Queen of Sheba is represented as actively associating herself with King Solomon in her conversion to his religion (Q 27:44), thereby assimilating herself and her people into the group of believers. We do not see such forms of assimilation in the biblical account.

5.3.3 Cognitive and Power Identification

Solomon has been identified in relation to his knowledge (Q 27:15, 42); the language of birds (27:16, 22–28), the language of ants (Q 27:18–19), and the language of the *jinn* (Q 27:39). The theme of knowledge continues in other references to Solomon and David beyond *sūra* 27 such as in Q 21:78–82, thereby constituting signs Solomon's and David's legitimate king-cum-prophetic status and their moral paradigmatic excellence as role models for emulation.

According to the biblical version of the narrative, however, it is the Queen who takes the initiative to visit Solomon. Like many other kings and leaders, she is drawn to him on account of hearing so much about his fame, achievements, wisdom, and wealth (1 Kings 10:6–7). Thus, in this regard, we have seven references to his wisdom. Here, the Queen is depicted as arriving "to test Solomon with hard questions" and speaking to him about "all that she had on her mind" (1 Kings 10:1–2). In the Bible she is thus depicted as agentive and independent:

she comes of her own accord; she appears to lead the direction of the conversation. The use of the verb “test,” together with the qualifier “hard” portrays the Queen as an intelligent, critical thinking, and independent woman who revels in challenge. Her gender is not called into question and her status as Queen is not deemed to be peculiar or extraordinary.

In the Qur’ān, however, Solomon first learns about the Queen’s existence, from his bird Hoopoe. According to the Qur’ānic telling, prior to Hoopoe’s discovery, both sovereigns are oblivious to one another. Having been informed about her, Solomon initiates the meeting with the Queen with a letter. Not only is Hoopoe intrigued by her gender, her magnificent throne, and her abundance of wealth, but he is also stunned by the fact that the people of Saba’ choose to worship the Sun instead of the Creator of the Sun.

In the Qur’ān, Solomon takes the initiative and remains in control before and during the meeting. The Queen is therefore portrayed as active and responsive but relatively less agentive. Moreover, here it is Solomon who seeks to test the Queen using a series of “mind games” to check her ability to discern the truth from deception. The penultimate test is to “see if she can recognize the truth regarding her throne”, which is used as a “metaphor that foreshadows her ability to recognize her worldly throne as metaphorically subservient to the throne of God” (Ibrahim 2020, 97). The sequential unfolding of the mind games which are initiated almost always by Solomon constitute the bulk of the Qur’ānic telling of the Queen’s visit.

The tension between knowing and not knowing and the limitations of not knowing are frequently recounted. Solomon’s knowing is directly connected to God and to the knowledge that God has taught him. This gives him the edge in all matters. In this narrative, since Solomon and the Queen are “equals” in their roles and social status as monarchs in their respective kingdoms, knowledge, and physical power take on renewed meaning and become the “authoritative” yardsticks (because they are construed as divinely ordained) by which Solomon is able to impose the legitimacy of his belief in God over that of the Queen’s disbelief. Since knowledge is perceived to be powerful; knowledge of divine origin becomes an even more powerful means with which to overpower one’s rival.

5.3.4 Appraisal

Social actor appraisal is an important strategy by which we can understand how male and female actors in the narrative have been represented. Appraisal is a key element of Qur’ānic and biblical narratives as it is central in conveying the moral or theological message of the narrative. It is a salient form of actor representation. In this section, I will explore positive and negative forms

of appraisal that occur in both scriptural texts and will use these findings to extrapolate the broader narrative agendas behind the telling.

The Qur'ānic telling of the Solomon narrative is fundamentally dialogic—this is a structural characteristic common to most Qur'ānic narratives. The narrative reporting by the Divine is frequently intercepted by the re-presented speech of a range of social (and non-human) actors. The perspective from which the narrative is recounted thus also shifts depending on whose speech is being foregrounded. Appraisal of self and other human and non-human actors is hence also an important element of Qur'ānic narrating. Thus, in the Solomon excerpt, we find that Solomon and the Queen have been appraised by a range of actors, thereby constructing a particular image(s) of these actors that is multi-dimensional. Which dimensions of their identities are foregrounded and which are backgrounded; thus become imbued with meaning particularly for believing communities who seek to emulate celebrated prophetic agents.

In contrast to this, the biblical passage is largely recounted through reported speech. There is little if any Divine appraisal. The account of the visit is told from the perspective of the Queen, i.e., it is focalized entirely from her point of view and we have a short re-presentation of her speech in this excerpt. Thus, the biblical telling is both mono-dimensional (only one actor's views are presented) and monologic. The excerpt recounts the Queen's overwhelmingly positive appraisal of King Solomon.

5.3.5 Exaltation

A common representational strategy that carries with it evaluative meanings and is used in both scriptural texts is "exaltation," which denotes preference/*taf-dīl* over others. As such, the use of this strategy constructs an implicit/explicit hierarchical configuration that positions certain key social actors, like Solomon and the Queen at the top. In this regard, from the perspective of the Queen, Solomon in the Bible is exalted on the grounds of his fame, accomplishments, and his connection to God. Beyond these, there are frequent references to the Queen's feeling of being overwhelmed at the sight of his splendor, wisdom, and accomplishments (1 Kings 10:4–8). The use of the mental affective reaction "overwhelmed" depicts the Queen as passive and no longer in agentic control of the situation.

In the biblical account, the Queen is already depicted as knowing about Solomon's special "relationship to the Lord" and is already depicted as being a woman of faith who praises the Lord for having chosen Solomon to be the king. The motivating factors for her visit are primarily to see for herself, his wisdom and splendor—not his religion. As a token of appreciation for her visit, Solomon gives the Queen "all that she desired and asked for" in addition to what he had

already given her “out of his royal bounty.” Despite being “overwhelmed” this visit was very much a meeting of two “equals” in faith, status, and wealth. She offers him generous gifts in the form of “a *very great* caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones” (1 Kings 10:2), which Solomon is implied as happily receiving.

Here we have a qualifier in the form of “very” and the adjective “great” to describe the opulence of gifts in her caravan which are presented in a list format. Here the repeated use of the quantifier “large quantities” also serves to convey that the gifts she brought were “great” in quantity as well as rarity. This is confirmed by the verse “Never again were so many spices brought in as those the Queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon” (1 Kings 10:10).

Conversely, in the Qur’ān, the Queen’s visit is a means to convince her to accept the monotheistic faith of Solomon on account of viewing his many extraordinary powers. Thus, it is the Queen who seeks to test and appease Solomon by displaying her wealth in the form of gifts, before she arrives at the palace. However, unlike in the Bible where the exchange of gifts between the two monarchs is presented as customary, in the Qur’ān, Solomon’s lack of need for material wealth is strikingly clear and he is implied as insulted by her attempts to appease him in this way (Q 27:36). The Queen thus quickly learns that Solomon is no ordinary king. It is not her wealth that interests him; rather, he has a higher purpose: to get her to think and reflect on her choice of god. It is to convince her by recourse to drawing on his many forms of divine empowerment and support, that the true god is not the sun but the Creator of the sun.

Essentially, this Qur’ānic narrative recounts the Queen’s journey from her sun-worshipping religion to that of the religion of God. The mind games and tests, such as Solomon’s letter, the Queen’s material gifts, and Solomon’s acquisition of the Queen’s throne constitute the milestones on this journey of conversion. The Queen’s political state visit and witnessing of the illusion of the palace’s architecture characterize the culmination of her conviction in the truth of Solomon’s message and the sincerity of his prophetic mission. As Mir rightly points out, the Queen’s conversion is “but a logical culmination of a process of change of heart the Queen had been undergoing long before her visit to Solomon’s palace” (Mir 1993, 43). In converting to his monotheistic religion, she is not represented as being defeated nor is Solomon depicted as being victorious over her. As Osman rightly points out; “it cannot be said that Bilqīs [the Queen of Sheba] is portrayed as a vanquished leader, but a victorious soul” (Osman 2015, 72).

Rather, Satan, who prevented the Queen and her people from seeing the Truth, is implicated as being defeated by both monarchs together, thus

restoring the victory of good over evil (Q 27:24). It is also important to point out that the Queen is not represented as submitting *to* Solomon. Rather she is represented as submitting *with* Solomon to the Lord of the worlds, “thus putting herself shoulder to shoulder with the king” (Osman 2015, 69) and thereby underscoring her continued independence and autonomy as a rightful leader and reflecting her newly-found identity as a believing woman. The Queen’s meeting with Solomon and the subsequent exchange of ideas adds to her person; she loses nothing because of her conversion. More importantly, in this way, she illustrates the essence of *tawhīd*: submission to none except God.

5.3.6 Negative Appraisal

Solomon is negatively appraised in the Qur’ān by the female ant by way of magnifying the impact of Solomon’s mighty army (Q 27:18). The theme of Solomon’s great might and matchless army is then continued by the Queen’s negative evaluation of kings as ruining the places they invade and shaming the elite inhabiting these places (Q 27:34). Her suspicions are confirmed by Solomon himself in Q 27:37, in which he threatens to do exactly that. Interestingly, the Queen here is demonstrated as having an affinity with the female who reflects similar kinds of protective tendencies towards her people (Ibrahim 2020, 97). The juxtaposition of Solomon’s authoritarian, invasive, and terror-inducing rule with the diplomatic, maternalistic, and protective rule of the Queen reflects the overwhelming power of Solomon. His threat to punish Hoopoe for his absence also reinforces a picture of Solomon as a ruthless and formidable king (Q 27:21). In the Bible, the Queen comes and goes by her own will—in the Qur’ān, she is coerced into coming to visit Solomon against the threat of a mighty invasion. The removal of her throne from her palace denotes much more than simply an opportunity for Solomon to demonstrate the extent of his “reach” and powers from God. The Queen and her mighty throne are hostage until she surrenders to Solomon’s monotheistic religion.

Any negative construal of the Queen is not personal: it is primarily a negative appraisal of her choice of faith. Thus, both Hoopoe’s and Solomon’s critique of the Queen concerns itself with “her and her people worshipping the sun instead of Allāh” (Q 27:24, 25, 43). Her illusion concerning the choice of faith is mirrored back to her when she mistakes the floor of the glass palace to be running water (Q 27:44). She is momentarily unable to “see past the deceptive nature of material realities in order to perceive transcendent ones” (Ibrahim 2020, 97). This ultimately leads to her conversion to the monotheistic faith of Solomon. Otherwise, she is implicitly celebrated for her ability to discern the standing and nobility of a king from his letter (Q 27:29); her

diplomatic leadership style which evokes a strong sense of loyalty and faith in her judgment from her nobles (Q 27:33); an accurate insight into the psyche and destructive practices of conventional kings (Q 27:34) and a courageous and creative ability to discern the kind of King Solomon might be by sending him opulent gifts to learn his actual intention for forwarding her his letter (Q 27:35). Her ability to discern truth from illusion is also demonstrated in her ability to recognize her throne when she sees it (Q 27:42) and to recognize the truth of Solomon's monotheistic faith. The Queen of Sheba thus "emerges as a commendable figure, not only for her skillful diplomacy but also, ultimately, for the power of her perception," which enables her to see beyond the deception of materiality and accept the Truth (Ibrahim 2020, 97).

6 The Para-narrative Aim of Vindicating Solomon

Having briefly explored the two versions of the narrative and analyzed them to construct a more nuanced understanding of the Qur'ānic telling of Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba, in this section, I will now interpret the findings from the analyses in light of the Qur'ān's broader narrative agendas.

Undoubtedly, the findings demonstrate that the most important theological narrative agenda behind recounting the Solomon story in the Qur'ān is to portray Solomon's divinely authorized prophetic status. One of the striking findings concerning naming practices within the Qur'ān's narratives is that only certain prophetic agents whose stories were being related were actually named. Regardless of gender or religio-spiritual differences, these prophetic agents of Qur'ānic revelation were all informally identified by their first names, which denote the target audience's familiarity with these archetypal prophetic figures from the "sacred past" (Stowasser 1994, 3). The only exception is Mary, the mother of Jesus who has also been named alongside male prophets. Interestingly, the Queen also remains unnamed in the biblical account. I argue that the selection of their narratives at the expense of others may also reflect the theological significance of their persons during the sociocultural context of Qur'ānic revelation.

Thus, in accordance with the Qur'ān's complex and undeniably strategic para-narrative aims of narrating, these morally paradigmatic, role model actors were highlighted as the deliberate theological "points of identification" (Van Leeuwen 1996, 53) for the believing community for whom "Qur'ānic narratives serve as powerful teaching devices" (Stowasser 1994, 3–4). Using this strict naming mechanism, the divine Narrator thus simultaneously draws attention to them as well as directs the reader's focus to understand the story from their perspective.

Apart from these excerpts of varying length and detail, which relate to the Solomon story, there are other free-standing Qur'ānic references (Q 2:102, 4:163 and 6:84) to him, which hold important clues as to how he is perceived by the Divine, how he was misunderstood by his own people, and, therefore, why the telling of his story was so important. Without acknowledging these contextually significant references, the larger periscopes appear, on the surface, to lack any strategically motivated objective or purpose. Q 2:102 is perhaps the most important of them all; it clearly explicates the Qur'ānic/divine stance on King Solomon:

And follow that which the devils falsely related against the kingdom of Solomon. Solomon disbelieved not; but the devils disbelieved, teaching mankind magic and that which was revealed to the two angels in Babel, Hārūt and Marūt.

What this verse is indicating, according to the most common view held by Muslim exegetes, is the evil books of magic that Solomon had taken from the *jinn* and devils, who sought to spread disbelief and corruption in the land. On Solomon's orders, the magic was collated and buried under his throne, to eliminate and curtail its evil effects, knowing that none dared to access it from that place. After his death, however, the devils slandered him by claiming that Solomon was not a real prophet; he had used these very books of magic as the source of his great powers to subjugate men, animals, birds, and *jinn* for his own greed for ultimate power. Essentially then, one of the primary para-narrative aims of the story of Solomon in the Qur'ān was to vindicate him from these allegations of disbelief and sorcery levelled at him. Solomon then, far from being a magician or a disbeliever, has been depicted in the Qur'ān as an established prophetic agent to whom God had sent divine *waḥy* (revelation) just as He had revealed to others like him (Q 4:163). Subsequently, the predicates used to describe him are strategically important in reinstating his legitimate status as a genuine prophet-cum-king (see also Lassner 1993, 41; Osman 2015, 68). For instance, he is depicted as receiving the same prestige that other chosen prophetic agents received, which meant that he, like them, was also divinely empowered in a way to prove his rightful place amongst the chosen ones. Moreover, he has been frequently attributed/implicated with a profound sense of gratitude to the Divine for these favors, which consistently humble/inspire him to become ever more God-conscious and supplicate for the ability to enact more good deeds that will be "pleasing to God" (Q 27:19) and facilitate his assimilation amongst God's pious servants. The fact that elsewhere he has been praised for being "an excellent slave" (Q 38:30) and the verses emphasizing his profound gratitude to God and continuous repentance

not only reinforce his sincerity of commitment to the divine plan but also restate him as a valid role model for all believers.

6.1 *Celebration of (Non-)Prophetic Agents*

The findings nevertheless implicate a more complex picture. Just because only prophetic agents are named does not negate the possibility that other actors may also have role model potential. The fact that all other actors, regardless of their gender or social/occupational background and import in the narrated context, are identified by other non-specific means, underscores the prevailing moral dimension of Qur'ānic narrating (Stowasser 1994, 21). This is because it is not the detail but the moral message that ultimately matters, but, importantly, the detail is nevertheless required to construct and convey the import of the message. However, as opposed to Van Leeuwen's (2008, 53) argument that unnamed social actors play "passing roles in narratives" and do not become "points of identification" for readers, or Wadud's claim that this is reflective of the Qur'ān's normative way of representing marginal social actors in that they are merely required for purposes of narrative coherence (Wadud 1999, 32), the findings have shown that both these assertions are far too simplistic. This is because non-prophetic actors such as the Queen are not merely used to "clarify the role of the main character" (Wadud 1999, 32), but have been given, through elements of speech representation and focalization, the discursive space to present themselves in a way that not only implicates divine sympathy but also creates a space for reader sympathy. In effect, the Queen is given discursive space to recount her story "in her own words." In so doing, the primarily *tawhīdic* purpose of his invitation to the Queen is also reinforced.

The very fact that her journey to faith is explored in such detail, may also be indicative of her function as a worthy role model, in a similar fashion to the male prophetic agent with whom she is connected. However, in light of the Qur'ān's para-narrative aims, it is clear that religious identity construction, development, and transformation are the primary dimensions of a believer's identity that the Qur'ān seeks to shape and mold through the *mathal* (example) of both male and female actors. The social aspects of their identity are thus backgrounded considerably and identified only in relation to how it intersects with the primary "organizing principle" of religio-spiritual identity.

7 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has demonstrated that there are many para-narrative agendas in the recounting of the various fragments of the Qur'ānic Solomon narrative. These comprise emphasising Solomon as a prophet-cum-king with

extraordinary powers and means of empowerment which all originated from the Divine. Thus, in the Qur'ān, we have an extensive description of various forms of empowerment by way of exonerating him from allegations of sorcery. In addition, the frequent attribution of key character traits and ethical practices like humility, gratitude, and repentance establish him (and David) as exemplary paradigmatic role models. Moreover, contrary to the Hebrew Bible, where the Queen of Sheba is already implicated as a woman of faith, the primary agenda of the Qur'ānic telling is to emphasize the fundamentally religious purpose behind meeting the Queen. As such, establishing *tawhīd* conceptually (an idea) as well as in practice (through conversion) is aptly demonstrated by the Queen. Perhaps this is why she remains one of the rare (if not only) figures whose conversion story is recounted in the Qur'ān. To reiterate then, although the various fragments of the Solomon story might be ultimately connected to one prophetic agent, the purposes behind each telling may seek to strategically transmit different moral, theological, and edificatory messages.

These findings have been made apparent primarily based on the critical discourse analytical perspective from which dispersal, thematic, and socio-semantic analyses were performed. Moreover, a holistic approach allowed for the close unpacking of Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'ān and Hebrew Bible. Against the backdrop of locating these narrative excerpts in the entirety of the Solomon story in both scriptures by way of a close comparative approach, the better discerning of the para-narrative agendas of the Qur'ānic telling has been fruitful. The "phenomenon of recurring narratives" in the Qur'ān, to which Neuwirth refers, deserves to be studied as much more than "as testimonies of the consecutive stages of the emergence of a community" (Neuwirth 2006, 107). This chapter has demonstrated that by adopting a holistic approach to Qur'ānic narratives; one that interprets the narrative in light of all other Qur'ān-internal narratives and singular references, we are able to develop a more nuanced understanding of the narrative in question. Because of the apparent irrelevance of singular references to the verses that precede them, the reader is compelled, by a process of hermeneutical "shock" to sharpen their focus, thus refreshing the reader's attention (Campbell 2009, 11). In this way, not only are the agendas of Qur'ānic narrating foregrounded and therefore easier to identify, but they are more likely to shape and mold the reader's interpretative engagement with the fragments of the (whole) narrative. As such, vindicating Prophetic figures and even significant non-prophetic agents like the Queen of Sheba is a key facet of the Qur'ān's theological edificatory process of the Abrahamic faith communities.

This chapter also calls into question the extent to which a comparative approach to the Bible is useful in terms of enabling us to develop a nuanced understanding of the Qur'ānic versions of certain narratives. Reynolds rightly

states that “without knowledge of the biblical account, the audience is left in a state of bewilderment” (Reynolds 2010, 234); however, there are no references to Solomon’s use of magic, for example, in the Bible, which implies that such allegations are post-biblical. This calls for an approach that goes beyond even the scriptural texts, to explore post-biblical commentaries, in order to better understand the meaning of verses like Q 2:102 and Q 34:14.

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PART 2

*The Reception History of the Qur'ānic
Narrative and Morality*



The Qur'ānic Narrative and Its Reception History

Samer Rashwani

1 Introduction

In his typology of the Qur'ānic genres in terms of their religious significance and scholarly appeal, al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) ranks Qur'ānic narratives quite low in comparison with the theological and legal verses. “The study of Qur'ānic narratives of the prophets and their adversaries and foes is a study to be maintained by storytellers (*quṣṣās*), admonishers (*wu'āz*), and some traditionalists (*muḥaddithīn*), and it [this sort of study] has no public urgency” (al-Ghazālī 1986, 39). This critical assessment seems to reflect the viewpoint of many scholars who shunned away from engaging with Qur'ānic narratives. However, it does not represent the widespread interest in these narratives throughout history, which is attested by the vast number of manuscripts on *qīṣaṣ* worldwide, in Arabic and other languages (Tottoli 2002, 165). Most of these manuscripts were written by anonymous authors, some by undistinguished authors, and a few by well-versed scholars. It is worth noting that neither al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) nor al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) admitted the “Qur'ānic narratives” as a Qur'ānic discipline (*ʿilm*) in their compendium of Qur'ānic studies. It is only the later Ibn ʿAqīla (d. 1150/1737) who recognized the absence of that genre and included it in his compendia (Ibn ʿAqīla 2006, 7:5–53).

This chapter endeavors to offer a preliminary overview of the reception history of Qur'ānic narratives. It will delve into their relative marginalization in pre-modern scholarship and draw upon the historical, theological, and epistemological factors that shaped their interpretation, ultimately leading to their diminished prominence. Furthermore, the chapter will touch upon the contemporary burgeoning interest in these narratives, highlighting emergent approaches with a particular emphasis on literary critique.

Narratives occupy roughly one-third of the Qur'ān. Qur'ānic narratives were present in early Meccan *sūras* (e.g., Q 85, 71, 15) and, to a lesser extent, in Medinan ones (e.g., Q 2, 3). Many *sūras* spin around a narrative core of prophetic (biblical and non-biblical) and non-prophetic stories. The Qur'ān, self-referentially, recognizes its narratives as a distinctive genre designed for specific purposes and has particular features. Qur'ānic narratives were intended

to offer the Prophet personal solace and uplift (Q 11:120); exhortation and a reminder for the believers (Q 12:111); confirmation of previous scriptures (Q 12:111); proof of Muḥammad's prophethood (Q 3:44, 12:102); and warning for non-believers (Q 7:101). They were distinguished for their veracity, authenticity, and primacy (Q 3:61). They functioned as satisfaction for the demand of the Meccans (Q 18:38, 31:6) and Muslims (e.g., al-Ḥākim 1996, 2:409n3377), and as a response against the counter-narratives of the Meccans as well as the Jews and Christians (Q 3:62, 27:76).

Drawing from *ḥadīth* sources, there appears to be minimal evidence suggesting that Prophet Muḥammad actively engaged in narrating or commenting on Qur'ānic narratives. Only a handful of reports are attributed to the Prophet that expand upon a few Qur'ānic stories, notably the tales of Ismā'īl, Hājar, Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd, and Aṣḥāb al-Kahf. Most early *ḥadīth* collections did not allocate significant space to such reports (cf. Ibn al-Athīr 1969–1972, 4:30–41; 8:512–524; for biographic information about the prophets with no *ḥadīths* 12:111–117).¹ Except al-Būkhārī (d. 256/870) who dedicates a chapter to the prophetic narratives, titled (*aḥādīth al-anbiyā'*). The comments made by the Prophet primarily pertained to the characters of the prophets and their relationship to him rather than their stories as narrated in the Qur'ān (Tottoli 2002, 122).

In contrast, numerous reports have been attributed to younger companions, such as Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687) and Abū Hurayra (d. 59/681), who displayed a keen interest in delving into the details of the Qur'ānic narratives. They often sought insights from Jews or Christians who converted to Islam, including figures like Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 32/652), Tamīm al-Dārī (d. 40/660), and 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām (d. 43/663). Although *ḥadīth* collections and traditionalist *tafsīrs* have preserved many of these accounts, questions remain regarding their authenticity and historicity (cf. El Calamawy 1983; al-Dhahabī 1995, 108–187).

1 It appears that later *ḥadīth* scholars cautioned against immersing oneself in historical reports, deeming them as distractions from the essential knowledge, specifically *fiqh*. This perspective stands in contrast to the approach of earlier generations. This dichotomy is evidenced in the accounts documented by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghḍādī (d. 463/1071). He cites Anas Ibn Mālīk (d. 93/712), who recounted, "We met with Mu'adh and requested, 'Share with us some of the lesser-known narrations of the Messenger of Allāh.'" Furthermore, scholars aiming to compile *ḥadīth* are advised to refrain from including historical narrations concerning ancient civilizations, such as those found in the book of *al-Mubtada'* ("Genesis"). Delving into such narrations is perceived as unfruitful, potentially diverting attention from more pivotal subjects. This sentiment is echoed by Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), who asserted, "Engaging in these archaic reports detracts from the knowledge that we are mandated to pursue" (al-Khaṭīb 1983, 2:160–161).

2 The Early Scholarship on Qur'ānic Narratives

Drawing inspiration from the Qur'ānic narratives, by the end of the first century, Muslim scholars embarked on a systematic inquiry into prophetic and universal history. Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. ca. 114/728) is regarded as a pioneering figure in documenting prophetic stories. His seminal work, *Kitāb al-Mubtada' wa-Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* ("The Book of Genesis and the Stories of the Prophets"), though no longer extant, is substantially preserved through quotations by historians, traditionalists, and exegetes. Within his oeuvre, Wahb exhibits a commendable endeavor to amalgamate biblical, post-biblical, and Arabic lore, offering a holistic view of sacred history. Nonetheless, discerning the extent of his engagement with the Qur'ānic narratives and their interpretation remains a challenge (cf. Khoury 1972; Pregill 2008).

Wahb's contributions significantly impacted subsequent exegeses and narrative genres such as *sīra*, *ḥadīth*, hagiography, history, and *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.² Later scholars, notably Ishāq ibn Bishr (d. 207/821) and 'Umāra ibn Wathīma al-Fārsī (d. 289/902), exhibited thematic congruencies with Wahb's framework, characterized by the reliance on biblical, post-biblical, and pre-Islamic legends, and the subsidiary role of the Qur'ānic narratives (Nagel 1967, 113–119; al-Fārisī 1978; Tottoli 2002, 138–141).

Alongside this genre, the burgeoning interest of early Muslim historians and exegetes in these narratives is evident. Figures such as al-Dīnawarī (d. 282/891), al-Ya'qūbī (d. 292/897), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) derive considerably from the works of Wahb and Ishāq ibn Bishr. Similarly, the exegetical works of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826), and al-Ṭabarī followed a congruent paradigm, delving deep into the historical facets of the stories but sparingly addressing their theological or spiritual interpretations (Tottoli 2002, 155). Yet, scholars like al-Ṭabarī displayed a proclivity for embracing varied historical renditions of identical narratives. For them, pinpointing the exact sequence of events was less pivotal than preserving diverse traditions that holistically encapsulated the religious essence of the Qur'ānic stories within the broader framework of sacred history (Tottoli 2002, 102; Gilliot 2003, 3:516b–528a).

2 *Qiṣaṣ* and *qaṣaṣ* both serve as plurals of *qiṣṣa* ("story or narrative"). The Qur'ān employs *qaṣaṣ* as an infinitive to denote narration and storytelling (cf. Q 12:3), and as a plural of stories or narratives (cf. Q 7:172, 12:111). *Qiṣaṣ*, however, does not appear in the Qur'ān. In terms of transliteration, I typically use *qiṣaṣ*, except in instances where authors explicitly use *qaṣaṣ*.

The earliest extant work on the stories of the prophets, not as a historical genre but as a Qur'ānic genre, is *ʿArāʾis al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* ("Grooms of Assemblies in the Lives of the Prophets") by the famous exegete al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035). In his introduction, he reflects on the rationales underlying the revelation of the Qur'ānic stories, citing five primary reasons: (a) to prove the prophecy of Muḥammad, who lacked prior knowledge of religious traditions; (b) to provide valuable examples for Muḥammad and his people; (c) to recognize the divine benevolence towards Muḥammad and his *umma*, particularly in juxtaposition with preceding generations; (d) to fortify the faith of the believers; and lastly (e) to honor the legacy of antecedent prophets and their communities (al-Thaʿlabī 1951, 2).

Ibn al-Hayṣam (d. 467/1075), a Karrāmī scholar, and the Andalusian writer Ibn Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (d. 454/1062), whose specific identity remains elusive, both penned works on the stories of the prophets with a clear intent to comment on Qur'ānic narratives. Their works exhibit an exegetical style wherein prophetic narratives revolve around Qur'ānic passages. They address certain exegetical quandaries and proffer resolutions. Their emphasis on the Qur'ānic narration did not deter them from incorporating extra-Qur'ānic details into their compilations. Generally, the works of al-Thaʿlabī, Ibn al-Hayṣam, and al-Ṭarafī were based on preceding literature; but distinctive in structure and the space dedicated to interpretation of vague Qur'ānic verses, and constant linking between some details of the stories with their corresponding verses. At a much later point, al-Khūshābī (d. 1096/1684), an Ottoman scholar, wrote *ʿArāʾis al-Qurʾān wa-Nafāʾis al-Furqān wa-Farādis al-Jinān* ("Brides of the Qurʾān, Gems of the Criterion, and Paradises of the Gardens") primarily as a commentary on the Qur'ānic stories with minimal reliance on the tradition of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (Ibn al-Hayṣam n.d.; al-Ṭarafī 2003; al-Khūshābī 2007).

Through a comprehensive study of the works on the stories of the prophets, two consistent characteristics emerge; irrespective of the differing objectives, sources, or depth. First, these narratives often revel in elaborate, quasi-historical details, such as the identification of heroes and adversaries, as well as specific dates and geographies. Secondly, the augmentation of Qur'ānic narratives with external material often stemmed from exegetical motivations. Such narratives were designed to clarify ambiguities in the Qur'ānic stories, addressing uncertain elements like timing, locations, and prominent figures. Their aim was not merely to provide a lavish tapestry of entertaining details but to address and resolve the complex exegetical and moral questions that the Qurʾān presented (Tottoli 2002, 165). Nevertheless, it is only in contemporary times that the Qur'ānic narrative truly evolved into a distinct literary genre. Subsequently, I will explore the factors contributing to its historical marginalization.

3 The Marginalization of Qur'ānic Narratives

Three theoretical considerations are deeply intertwined with traditional interactions with Qur'ānic narratives. These fundamental tenets, I argue, contributed to the diminished scholarly inquiry within this genre. The first issue pertains to the legal authority of prior prophetic laws. The second involves the concept of prophetic infallibility, which is based on the role of the prophets as an epitome of moral excellence. The third issue is tied to the negative image of the storytellers (*quṣṣāṣ*), the influence of extra-Qur'ānic material on the interpretation of Qur'ānic narratives and their ethical and moral connotations.

3.1 *The Normative Authority of Qur'ānic Narratives* (*Shar' man Qablanā*)

Muslim jurists have extensively deliberated on incorporating the laws of previous prophets as a legitimate source within the framework of Islamic jurisprudence. This discourse revolves around the authoritative status of the "legislations of the past prophets" (*shar' man qablanā*). While the precise beginning of this theoretical debate remains unclear,³ various indications suggest that early jurists derived legal principles from the narratives of the prophets as depicted in the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth*. Furthermore, compelling evidence supports this practice in numerous narrations attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad, his companions, and subsequent generations.

Within the realm of Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), scholars are primarily divided into two camps⁴ regarding the authority of past legislation that has not been abrogated or explicitly confirmed and is solely narrated in the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth*. The first school maintains that the legislations enacted by the past prophets hold legal validity and can serve as a legitimate basis for deriving legal rulings. This viewpoint is primarily attributed to the Ḥanafīs and the Malikīs, although it finds support among many Ḥanbalīs and some Shafī'īs. The second school argues that past legislations lack legal validity and cannot be acted upon. This perspective is held by numerous Mu'tazilīs, Ash'arīs, Shafī'īs, Ḥanbalīs, and Zāhirī jurist Ibn Ḥazm (d. 458/1064). There seems to be no unified opinion among the followers of each legal school (for a detailed presentation of the spectrum of opinions, see al-Zarkashī 1992, 6:39–47).

3 The earliest attested theoretical discussion of this matter was undertaken by Ḥanafīs such as al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933), who draws upon it in several books, and al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) (see al-Ṭaḥāwī 1994b, 1:489; 1994a, 5:133; 1997, 2:132, 1:119; al-Jaṣṣāṣ 1994, 3:19–28).

4 There are several other opinions and nuances, that are not crucial for our purpose here. For a comprehensive presentation of it, see al-Darwīsh 1990; for Shī'ī discussions, see Ayāzī 2013, 389–347.

Both groups present textual evidence from the Qur'an and *ḥadīth* and rational arguments supporting their respective positions. Those who reject the authority of past legislation cite Qur'ānic verses such as "To each of you, We prescribed a law and a method" (Q 5:48) and *ḥadīths* such as "You will follow the ways of those nations who were before you, span by span and cubit by cubit ..." ⁵ They also raise the issue of abrogation, emphasizing that the Muḥammadan Shari'a is the final revelation and supersedes all previous legislations.

However, several Qur'ānic verses emphasize the binding nature of the Shari'a established by past prophets for Muslims. For instance, "Those are the ones whom God has guided, so from their guidance take an example" (Q 6:90); "Indeed, We sent down the Torah, in which was guidance and light" (Q 5:44); "Follow the religion of Abraham" (Q 3:95); "So follow the religion of Abraham" (Q 16:123); "He has ordained for you of religion what He enjoined upon Noah" (Q 42:13); and "And We ordained for them therein a life for a life" (Q 5:45).

Moreover, there are *ḥadīths* in which the Prophet Muḥammad himself recognizes and upholds the practices of previous prophets as valid and binding for Muslims. For instance, the divine command to Moses, "Establish prayer for My remembrance" (Q 20:14), is quoted by the Prophet as evidence for performing missed prayers even after their designated time has passed. ⁶ The punishment for adultery is explicitly derived from the Torah. ⁷ Muḥammad and the Muslims used to fast on Āshūra (Yom Kippur) following the Jewish tradition. ⁸

5 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 4:169, *Kitāb Aḥādīth al-Anbiyā'* ("Book of the Stories of Prophets"), *Bāb Mā Dhukira 'an Banī Isrā'īl* ("Chapter on What Was Narrated by the Israelites"), no 3456; Muslim 1991, 4:2054, *Kitāb al-'Ilm* ("Book of Knowledge"), *Bāb Ittibā' Sunan al-Yahūd wa-l-Naṣārā* ("Chapter on Following the Traditions of Jews and Christians"), no 2669.

6 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 1:122, *Kitāb Mawāqit al-Ṣalāt* ("Book of Prayer Times"), *Bāb Man Nasiya Ṣalātan fa-l-Yuṣallī Idhā Dhakar wa-Lā Yu'īdu Illā Tilka al-Ṣalāt* ("Chapter on Whoever Forgets a Prayer Should Pray When He Remembers, and He Should Only Repeat That Particular Prayer"), no 597; Muslim 1991, 1:471, *Kitāb al-Masājid wa-Mawāqit al-Ṣalāt* ("Book on Mosques and Places of Prayer"), *Bāb Qaḍā' al-Ṣalāt al-Fā'ita wa-Istihbāb Tajīl Qaḍā'ihā* ("Chapter on Making Up Missed Prayers and the Recommendation of Promptly Making It Up"), no 680.

7 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 4:206, *Kitāb al-Manāqib* ("Books of Excellences"), *Bāb Qawlihi Ta'ālā: Ya'rīfūnahū kamā Ya'rīfūna Abnā'ahum wa-inna Farīqan minhum la-Yaktumūna al-Ḥaqqā wa-hum Ya'lamūn* ("Chapter on the Saying of God: They Recognize It as They Recognize Their Sons, Even Though There is a Party of Them Who Conceal the Truth and Do That Knowingly"), no 3635; Muslim 1991, 3:326, *Kitāb al-Hudūd* ("Book of Punishments"), *Bāb Rajm al-Yahūd Ahl al-Dhimma fī al-Zinā* ("Chapter on Stoning of the Jews, People of the Covenant, for Committing Adultery"), no 1699.

8 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 2:148, *Kitāb al-Ḥajj* ("Book of Pilgrimage"), *Bāb Qawlihi Ta'ālā: Ja'ala Allāh al-Ka'bata al-Bayta al-Ḥarāma Qiyāman lil-Nās* ("Chapter on the Saying of God:

Additionally, the Prophet asked Muslims to follow prophet David's practice of living from his own work and fasting every other day.⁹

However, a different approach to this issue was adopted by the Ḥanbalī scholar al-Ṭūfī (d. 716/1316), who believed that this issue depended on the moral rationality of the laws. He argued that "the legal rulings possess inherent goodness that remains unchanged regardless of the variations in laws. Therefore, they are good for us as well, and abandoning them would be detrimental." Al-Ṭūfī acknowledges that some scholars argue that the goodness of legislation is relative and dependent on the Lawgiver's perspective, "so what may have been considered good for previous generations may be bad for us." Unfortunately, he does not elaborate further on this, and supposedly, he addresses the common laws, not special rituals or prohibitions (al-Ṭūfī 1987, 3:179).

Beyond these theoretical discussions, early jurisprudential practices show that many jurists derived legal rulings from the narratives found in the Qur'ān. For instance, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī (d. 189/805), a student of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), argued for the legitimacy of sharing benefits based on the story of the prophet Sāliḥ, where he legislated the sharing of benefits between his people and the she-camel. He supported his argument with the following verse: "And inform them that the water is shared between them, each drink attended to" (Q 54:28) and "It [the she-camel] has a [time for] drink, and you have a [time for] drink, each on a known day" (al-Shaybānī 2012, 8:184).

Similarly, al-Shāfi'ī (d. 204/820) argued for the legitimacy of casting lots based on the story of Jonah (Yūnus), "cast lots, and was among the losers" (Q 37:141), and the story of Maryam, "you were not with them when they drew lots with their pens about who should be Mary's guardian" (Q 3:44) and for the legitimacy of labor hiring based on the story of Moses "One of the two women said, 'O my father, hire him. Indeed, the best one you can hire is strong and trustworthy'" (Q 28:26) (al-Shāfi'ī 2011, 5:44, 6:286, 7:128).

Furthermore, Mālik, as quoted by some of his students, argued for the permissibility of a father marrying off his daughter without her consent based on

God Has Appointed the Ka'ba, the Holy House, as an Establishment for Mankind"), no 1592; Muslim 1991, 2:792, *Kitāb al-Ṣiyām* ("Book of Fasting"), *Bāb Ṣawm Yawm 'Ashūrā'* ("Chapter on Fasting on the Tenth of Muḥarram"), no 1125.

9 Narrated by al-Bukhārī 2001, 3:40, *Kitāb al-Ṣawm* ("Book of Fasting"), *Bāb Ṣawm Dāwūd* ("Chapter on David's Fasting"), no 1979; Muslim 1991, 2:812, *Kitāb al-Ṣiyām* ("Book of Fasting"), *Bāb al-Nahy 'an Ṣawm al-Dahr li-Man Taḍarrara bihī aw Fawwata bihī Haqqan aw Lam Yuftir al-Īdayn wa-l-Tashrīq wa-Bayān Taḥdīl Ṣawm Yawm wa-Iftār Yawm* ("Chapter on the Prohibition of Fasting Continuously for One Who is Harmed by It or Neglects A Duty or Does Not Break Fast on the Two Īds and the Days of *Tashrīq*, and the Explanation of the Preference of Fasting a Day and Breaking the Fast a Day"), no 1159.

the story of Moses: “Indeed, I wish to wed you one of these, my two daughters” (Q 28:27) (al-Qayrawānī 1999, 4:394–395).

Al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) presents another interesting argument to justify the appointment of a slightly impaired individual as an *imām*. He states, “Because the Prophet of God, Moses, was not prevented from prophethood on account of a speech impediment, it is more fitting that he not be prevented from assuming the position of an *imām*” (al-Māwardī n.d., 44; see also chapter 8 in this volume).

The Shīʿī scholar Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rāwandī (d. 573/1178) deduced the validity of transactions based on legal authorization and deputyship from the story of the people of the cave “Now send one of you to the city with this coin of yours” (Q 18:19, also 12:72). Another Shīʿī scholar, al-Ardabīlī (d. 993/1585) rejected such arguments and evidence, arguing that these are rational rulings that need no scriptural evidence to be valid (al-Rāwandī 1985, 1:423–424; al-Ardabīlī n.d., 389–391).

Amongst the writers on the genre of *aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (legal exegeses), the Ḥanafī scholar al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) exhibited a keen interest in the legal, moral, and theological implications of certain narrative verses. The Mālikī exegete, al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), who expanded upon the legal verses, also incorporated the Qurʾānic narratives as sources for legal and moral reflections. A similar approach is seen in the Muʿtazilī exegete al-Ḥākim al-Jushamī (d. 494/1101) (for more details and examples, see chapter 1 in this volume). However, the legal approach to the narrative was primarily atomistic, literal, and limited in the scope of the consulted cases.

The crux of the matter resides in the hermeneutics of Qurʾānic narratives; that is: how we derive normative judgments from narratives that do not provide explicit, direct instruction in the form of the command “do” or “do not do.” Muslim jurists have extensively engaged in dialogue regarding the distinction between instructional and narrative language and how to extract normative rulings from prophetic actions. They concede that actions and narrative discourse are not as definitive or decisive when considering their normative implications. For instance, the Qurʾān narrates that Moses fled after killing an Egyptian. Can this act be considered commendable, or must we replicate it? Does it carry any normative significance?

Setting aside the complex and prolonged discussions around this matter, most scholars suggest that we should search for hints and indicators, whether textual or rational, to comprehend the normative value of narratives and actions. Take the previous example of Moses, who elaborated that his escape was driven by fear (Q 26:21). This rationale (fear of injustice) suggests that such

action is at least permissible under specific circumstances (cf. al-Jushamī 2019, 7:5347; al-Biqā'ī 1969, 14:22).

Izz al-Dīn Ibn 'Abd al-Salām (d. 660/1262) penned a distinct book elucidating Qur'ānic hints and indications that assist in determining the normative value of narratives and actions. He identified 33 indicators for commendable actions and 47 indicators for proscribed actions (Ibn 'Abd al-Salām 1987, 87–126). For instance, divine approval of a particular action signifies its permissibility, as evidenced when God accepted the vow of the wife of Amram ('Imrān) to dedicate her daughter to the temple. This, however, has been identified as an outdated form of vow by Muslim jurists (cf. al-Qurṭubī 1964, 44:66). Conversely, the tale of the garden owners in *sūra* 68, who planned to harvest without leaving anything for the impoverished, and as a result God destroyed it, indicates prohibition, prompting some jurists to suggest that farmers should leave a portion for the poor and bypassers and refrain from nocturnal harvesting (al-Qurṭubī 1964, 18:240).

The hermeneutics behind this, as defined by Ibn 'Abd al-Salām, is as follows: "The context serves as a guide to clarify the ambiguity, to weigh the possibilities, and to affirm the obvious, all according to the norm of usage. Thus, any attribute placed in the context of praise is considered praise, and any attribute that falls in the context of disapproval is considered disapproval" (Ibn 'Abd al-Salām 1987, 159).

In conclusion, extracting ethical and normative rules from narratives is complex, and encumbered by numerous considerations, not the least of which are their rhetorical and figurative potentialities. Thus, the hermeneutic process of interpreting Qur'ānic narratives, particularly their moral or normative implications, is an area that requires further study.

3.2 *The Infallibility of the Prophets* ('Iṣma)

The doctrine of *'iṣma* (infallibility or immunity from error and sin) serves as a pivotal framework for interpreting the prophetic narratives of the Qur'ān. It is the lens through which most later exegetes view these stories. Therefore, any element that seems to be at odds with this doctrine or fails to uphold the moral excellence and the role-model status of the prophets must be interpreted in a manner that preserves the image of the prophets as epitomes of human perfection.

However, this sensitivity to the fallibility of the prophets is a later phenomenon. Early scholars, whether exegetes, historians, or *ḥadīth* narrators, accommodated many details later deemed inappropriate. It was the Mu'tazilis who, since the late second century, vehemently defended this doctrine and accused

the storytellers and narrators of *ḥadīth* of disseminating such reports about the prophets. Around the same time, Shī'īs claimed immunity for their *imāms*, and only later, after the fourth/tenth century, added the prophets to the spectrum of immunity. Sunnī perspectives on the *ʿiṣma* of prophets evolved from initial skepticism to a more accepting stance, with various opinions on immunity from minor sins (Madelung 1973).

Various scholars have penned works in defense of the prophets, crafting interpretations that refute any flaws that might be understood from the Qur'ān. Al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044) authored a book in which he sought to absolve the prophets of any moral discrepancies present in Qur'ānic narratives through thoughtful reinterpretation. Ibn Ḥimyar (fl. ca. seventh–eighth/twelfth–thirteenth century) embarked on a similar endeavor, writing a work titled *Tanzīh al-Anbiyā' ʿammā Nasab ilayhim Ḥuṭhālat al-Aghbiyā'* ("Vindicating the Prophets against What the Fools Attributed to Them").

The doctrine of *ʿiṣma* was one of the reasons behind the dimming of the Qur'ānic stories as a source of moral guidance. Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201), who wrote a book critiquing storytellers (*quṣṣāṣ*), contends that our Sharī'a does not need the inclusion of the narratives and accounts of earlier prophets, especially since these narratives are sometimes tainted with stories that tarnish the infallibility of the prophets. When such stories reach the ears of the unlearned, sins may seem trivial, leading them to justify their misdeeds (Ibn al-Jawzī 1988, 160–161).

This dismissive attitude towards the stories of the prophets marked the shift of interest to the narratives of Muslim righteous paragons, which was the topic of another book of Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa* ("The Traits of The Elite"), where he omitted the prophetic stories and justified that as follows: "Our book is intended to heal, soften, and reform hearts. The stories of the prophets are scattered and limited. Moreover, these individual narrations do not fit the theme of our book, except when mentioning the asceticism of the Israelites or the celibacy of Jesus and his followers. These narrations are either of doubtful authenticity or actions prohibited by our Sharī'a. Given the established fact that our Prophet is the best among the prophets, and his community is the best of communities, and his Sharī'a prevails over all other legislations, we have confined ourselves to mentioning him and his community" (Ibn al-Jawzī 1979, 1:32–33).

3.3 *The Storytellers (Quṣṣāṣ) and Isrā'īliyyāt*

Another pivotal aspect that shaped the exegetical understanding of the Qur'ānic narratives and their legal, theological, and moral implications is the body of narrations known as *isrā'īliyyāt*. These are accounts of biblical or

post-biblical origins, propagated within Muslim culture since the first century. These extra-Qur'ānic narrations provided the early generations of exegetes with a rich interpretive treasury. It offered resolutions to numerous exegetical challenges, particularly those connected to prophetic stories or historical events. Far from being mere folklore or entertainment, these extra-Qur'ānic narrations were imbued with theological and moral queries and concerns.

Until the late second century, orthodox Muslim theology was still evolving, and elements later pruned from Muslim dogma remained profuse within early commentaries. Many of these elements pertained to divine attributes, anthropomorphism, the nature of celestial beings, and especially the status of prophets: their infallibility, their roles as divine messengers, and the essence of their message. Over the subsequent centuries, these materials gradually lost favor because of the codification of Sunna and the *isrā'iliyyāt's* failure to meet the scholarly standards of the emerging exegetical tradition (Newby 1986; McAuliffe 1998).

The emergence of *quṣṣās*, the development of their profession, and the very early debate about its legality are important factors in understanding the influence of the Qur'ānic narratives on early generations and demise in later generations. Ibn al-Jawzī attributed the harsh attack on *quṣṣās* to the fact that they mixed the canonical narratives, which can act as moral models for Muslims, with other non-canonical narratives, which are not admitted as a source of ethical orientation (Ibn al-Jawzī 1988, 158–159). The debate about the fictional and factual in the narration played a crucial role in forming the attitudes toward the narration in general in the circles of later *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* scholars. Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), al-'Irāqī (d. 806/1403), and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) have dedicated special treatises to criticize and warn of the narrations of the *quṣṣās* (see Ibn Taymiyya 1985; al-'Irāqī 2001; al-Suyūṭī 1984). Ultimately, all these factors led to the marginalization of the Qur'ānic narratives from the space of learned scholarship (for more on the history of *quṣṣās*, their roles, and reception, see Pauliny 1974; 'Athamina 1992; Armstrong 2017).

In addition to the historical criticism, some scholars dispraised the shallowness of this genre and its lack of spiritual depth. The preoccupation with the historical details of the Qur'ānic narratives was considered a deviation from their prime purpose. Abu 'Ubayd (d. 224/838) in *Gharīb al-Ḥadīth* ("The Unfamiliar Expressions in *Ḥadīth* Literature"), while talking about the outward and inner meaning of the Qur'ān stories, says: "God narrated to us the stories of 'Ād and Thamūd and other self-harming nations. He told us of their sins and how He punished them. This is the ostensible meaning (*ẓāhir*) ... As for the inner meaning (*bāṭin*), he intended that story as admonishment, warning, and alert not to follow their steps, else you will be banished by the same

punishment. ..." (Abū 'Ubayd 1984, 2:240–241). In other words, Qur'ānic narratives should be understood as typological and a source of moral orientation for the Muslim community.

Similar criticism has been raised by the exegete al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480), who said: "What prevented the Muslims from understanding the Qur'ān is that they understood the stories of the early and vanished nations as if their main message (*maqṣūd*) was reporting and historical recording. No! The main message (*maqṣūd*) of the Qur'ānic narratives is the *ītibār*" (al-Biqā'ī 1969, 8:524–525). *Ītibār*, as explained by al-Biqā'ī and his favorite Sufi scholars al-Ḥarrālī (d. 638/1241), is a complex hermeneutical process that aims at the crossing (*ʿubūr*) the outward historical meaning of the Qur'ānic narrative to its moral values and typological structure, which acts as an orienting model for individuals as well as the Muslim community (al-Biqā'ī 1969, 21:237; al-Ḥarrālī 1997, 432).

Al-Tustarī (d. 283/869), an early Sufi exegete, wrote a small treatise on spiritual and moral inferences that might be construed from the language of the Qur'ānic narratives, not the narratives themselves. For example, he conjectured the reasons behind naming Abraham as our father, not Adam (Q 22:78) (al-Tustarī 2004, 41–43). However, Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) was the most prominent Sufi who used the prophetic stories as a gateway into a discussion of his metaphysical and ethical thought. Different prophets represent different spiritual and moral types. Nettler considered his writing a genre of its own and called it "Sufi metaphysical storytelling" (Nettler 2003, 214; cf. Ibn 'Arabī 1946). His later disciples, like al-Jīlī (d. 826/1424), expanded this approach (Morrissey 2021, 174–175).

In general, we can identify three primary attitudes among the exegetes towards the *isrā'īliyyāt*: the maximalists, such as Muqātil, accommodated many of these narrations in his commentary. The moderate position is embodied by al-Ṭabarī, who collated the most comprehensive survey of the extra-Qur'ānic narratives. He took hermeneutical distance from them on many occasions, especially when they went against the textual evidence of the Qur'ān. Third, the minimalists either neglected extra-Qur'ānic material, such as al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944) and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), or approached them critically, such as Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), who incorporated in his history what he considered to be authentic. Later, Ibn Ḥajar extracted the volume on prophetic stories and conducted a critical analysis and review according to the criterion of the *ḥadīth* scholars (Ibn Ḥajar 1998).

Ultimately, there was no systematic method for integrating or disregarding these narrations, leading even minimalists to utilize them occasionally, driven by interpretive needs and the impact of early exegetical traditions. Moreover, from a hermeneutical perspective, some exegetes might perceive specific

details as infringing on the principle of prophetic infallibility, while others may regard these as the prophets' human aspects.

4 Qur'ānic Narratives in Modern Scholarship

In the early twentieth century, there was an unprecedented surge in interest in the Qur'ānic stories. This renaissance was primarily attributed to the prominence of rationality, historical criticism, and the translation of Western literature, both in theater and novels. Notably, in 1931, 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār (d. 1941) authored work on the stories of the prophets. He endeavored to distance his work from the *isrā'īliyyāt*, viewing them as sources of mythical and irrational details. However, he incorporated material from both the Old and New Testaments. Al-Najjār emphasized the paramount importance of reason and rational examination in assessing historical material. Thus, any concepts at odds with reason necessitated reinterpretation and reconciliation. Significantly, he expressed a readiness to align the creation narrative with Darwin's (d. 1882) theory, contingent upon its indisputable validation. Furthermore, al-Najjār succinctly highlighted the inherent lessons and morals in the Qur'ānic narratives (al-Najjār n.d., 12–16).

In 1937, Jād al-Mawlā (d. 1944), along with other Azharī scholars, penned *Qīṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* ("Qur'ānic Stories"), a book that gained substantial recognition in the twentieth century. In their introduction, they acknowledged the need to captivate young Muslim readers increasingly drawn to secular Western literary genres. They presented the prophets' lives as delineated in the Qur'ān, minimizing digressions into exegetical or historical discussions (Jād al-Mawlā 1937, 2).

The contribution of Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and his disciple, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), signified a shift from traditional approaches to Qur'ānic stories (cf. Jansen 1974). Four dominant aspects characterized their *tafsīr*:

1. A deliberate neglect of traditions from early Muslim converts, which were potential sources of *isrā'īliyyāt*.
2. A systematic reference to biblical material as the primary comparative source, overshadowing the *isrā'īliyyāt*.
3. A tendency to emphasize the edifying elements of the stories, offering moral and religious guidance.
4. A symbolic interpretation of certain narratives, such as those of Adam and Ibrāhīm's interaction with the birds (Riḍā and 'Abduh 1990, 2:165, 3:45–49).

Consequently, Qur'ānic narratives evolved as a distinctive genre, with their revival characterized by a departure from traditional paradigms in objectives, sources, and methodologies. The primary aim of examining these narratives shifted from being historical to religious. Modern historical texts rarely feature prophetic tales, save for a few that seek to verify the historicity of Qur'ānic narratives against burgeoning skepticism (e.g., al-Badrāwī 1996).

As for sources, the Qur'ān and verified *ḥadīths* have emerged as primary foundations for reconstructing Qur'ānic narratives, relegating extraneous traditions as redundant or potentially detrimental to Islamic teachings.

Regarding methodology, various approaches to Qur'ānic narratives have come to the fore. Some scholars focus on literary components, while others emphasize philological and parenetical dimensions.

Muḥammad 'Abduh outlined two distinct methodologies for interpreting the Qur'ānic narratives: first, the historical approach favored by the early scholars, or *salaf*, which views these narratives as reflections of historical truths, and second, the allegorical perspective espoused by the later scholars, or *khalaf*. This latter method suggests that the Qur'ān often conveys profound meanings, expressing them through dialogic structures or narrative frameworks to heighten clarity and resonance. For example, the story of Adam, encompassing the divine dialogue with the angels and subsequently with Adam himself, symbolizes the creation of Earth, the intrinsic forces that mold it, and the spiritual principles that sustain and govern it. This culminates in the emergence of sentient beings with free will, representing the pinnacle of terrestrial existence. Riḍā hints at the fact that 'Abduh got the inspiration for such interpretation from the sociology and philosophy of history (Riḍā and 'Abduh 1990, 1:232–233).

In 1937, Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) embarked on a profound literary examination of the Qur'ānic narrative. He explored the artistic imagery (*al-taṣwīr al-fannī*) of the Qur'ān and subjected it to an exhaustive literary critique anchored deeply in the canons of literary analysis. Quṭb delved into various aspects of literary aesthetics, emotive resonance, illustrative and allegorical techniques, the conceptualization of protagonists, and the anticipated response of readers or observers. His analyses of prophetic figures were insightful. He characterized Moses as an impassioned, mercurial leader; Abraham as the epitome of serenity and forbearance; and Joseph as discerning and judicious (Quṭb 1988, 200–209). Quṭb emphasized that the religious impetus was central to the Qur'ānic narrative. This spiritual drive permeates its structure, stylistic attributes, and artistic nuances. Yet, in response to a common misconception or misinterpretation of the concept of “art,” Quṭb felt compelled to clarify. In the third edition, released seven years after the first, he emphasized that he finds no

compelling historical evidence obliging him to interpret Qur'ānic narratives as fictitious or imaginative. He asserted that the legitimacy of a literary narrative does not rely solely on fictional constructs without empirical evidence (Qutb 1988, 255–256).

Many scholars, inspired by Qutb, have approached the Qur'ānic narrative as a distinct literary genre, analyzing it primarily for its aesthetic characteristics (e.g., al-Zawāhirī 1991; Bāḥādhiq 1993; Nāyif 2011). Some have delved into specific literary motifs, exploring themes like the father-son relationship (Ḥafīz 1990), inherent ethical values (Muṭāwī' 1988), and the portrayal of women in these narratives (al-Sharqāwī 2001).

In a distinct perspective, Khalaf Allāh (d. 1991) in 1947 (published in 1951) posited that the Qur'ānic narratives should be perceived not as purely “historical” but as examples of “narrative art.” He emphasized that their primary function was to convey theological, social, and ethical messages. Khalaf Allāh suggested that the primary intent of the revelation was less about historical accuracy and more about the psychological impact of these stories on both believers and non-believers, including the Prophet Muḥammad. Such views led to accusations against Khalaf Allāh of undermining the “historicity” of the Qur'ānic narratives (for more details, see Wielandt 1971; Naqra 1974; Salama 2020).

‘Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb (d. 1985) later offered a nuanced stance that has since gained predominance: while the Qur'ānic narratives serve as admonitions to humanity, they are neither strictly historical accounts nor entirely fictional. Significantly, they do not contradict established historical records (al-Khaṭīb 1974, 275–348, where even the symbolism is rejected).

In line with this, Shaḥrūr (d. 2019) concurs with ‘Abduh and most contemporary scholars, asserting that the primary intent behind the Qur'ānic narrative is not purely historical. Shaḥrūr interprets the Qur'ānic narratives as a philosophical reflection on history, providing insights into the progression of human history and its moral and legal evolutions. He postulates that the term *‘ibra*, as mentioned in the Qur'ān, encapsulates the primary purpose of these narratives (Shaḥrūr 2010).

Furthermore, specific studies have focused on the traditional literature of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* and *tafsīr*, delving into the mythological elements and dimensions of *isrā'iliyyāt* and examining material beyond the Qur'ānic text (e.g., al-Sa'fī 2006; al-Kawwāz 2006; 2008).

Besides the common reference to the Bible in modern works on Qur'ānic narratives, studies have been interested in comparing the Qur'ānic and biblical narratives (see, for example, Bennabi 1948; al-Dajānī 1994; al-Khālidi 2004; al-Ashqar 2011).

4.1 *Qur'ānic Narratives in Western Scholarship*

Since the early nineteenth century, Western scholars, well-versed in biblical traditions, focused on the Qur'ānic narratives as a proxy to understand the influence of Jewish, Christian, or extra-biblical sources on the genesis of the Qur'ān (e.g., Weil 1845; Sidersky 1933; Speyer 1961; Schwarzbaum 1982). This tendency experienced its ebb and flow during the twentieth century but has been revitalized with new language in recent decades. Whereas terms like “borrowing” or “misunderstanding” were common in the early period, they have been recently replaced with more nuanced ones, such as “dialogue,” “creative commentary,” or “rewriting” of biblical and post-biblical texts. In either case, these approaches were not focused on explaining the function, form, or effect of these “modified” stories on the Qur'ān's audience in terms of theology or morality (Stewart 2017; see also Fück 1934). Only in the last couple of decades have scholars shown significant interest in addressing these questions, emphasizing approaching the Qur'ān as a literary text (for more on the literary turn in Qur'ānic studies, see Zadeh 2015). This later direction appeared contemporaneously with the recent developments in literary theory and moral philosophy or what is now called “narrative ethics.” This perspective also found traction in biblical studies.

4.1.1 Narrative Ethics

During the 1980s, moral philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur (d. 2005), Charles Taylor (b. 1931), Alasdair MacIntyre (b. 1929), and Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947), as well as literary theorists like Wayne Booth (d. 2005), Adam Newton (b. 1957), and James Phelan (b. 1951), held a position that regards narrative and ethics as inseparable. Moral philosophers noted that stories conduct an ethical inquiry in ways superior to those of analytic philosophy (Phelan 2014). Charles Taylor argues that stories about self and society construct the “horizons of meaning” that form the essential background for social relations and life choices. Narratives represent a movement in moral space, crafting coherence and continuity in our lives (Grassie 2010, 159). Literary critics made a strong case for the ethical importance of literature and literary criticism. For Newton, “narrative ethics implies narrative as ethics: the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalizing a person, and the reciprocal claims binding the teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (Newton 1995, 10–11).

In this vein, scholars of Qur'ānic studies have increasingly shifted their focus towards viewing the Qur'ān as a literary text. This approach emphasizes primary engagement with the text of the Qur'ān itself. Such “literary” investigations delve deeply into the forms, structures, genres, rhetorical elements, and other textual attributes. Neuwirth's scholarship has been seminal not only in

pioneering formal literary analysis of the Qur'ān and its *sūras* (Neuwirth 1981, 2014) but also in exploring the theological and moral ramifications of Qur'ānic narratives, along with their roles in shaping the nascent Muslim community (Neuwirth 2009). She, alongside other scholars, posits that these prophetic narratives serve as archetypes and typological antecedents, offering insights into Muḥammad's experiences and the evolution of his community (e.g., Busse 1979; Zwettler 1990; Lassner 1993; Stewart 2017; Neuwirth and Hartwig 2021).

Antony Johns stands out with his extensive studies on the trajectories the Qur'ānic narratives took in various fields of Islamic tradition. For him, stories "are excellently told and command interest in their own right—whether from the content of the story they present or the theology implicit in or drawn from the Qur'ānic narrative they are designed to highlight. Shifts in the attitudes of the Muslim community to such stories and their interpretation may mark the emergence of trends and tendencies in the intellectual history of Islam and are part of the long-term working out of ideas in the Muslim community and its changing perception of itself" (Johns 1997; also 1981; 1989; 2005). Similarly, Whitney S. Bodman (2011) has undertaken a comprehensive analysis of the stories and passages in the Qur'ān pertaining to the figure of Iblīs. He asserts that Iblīs is not a monolithic figure with a singular role and function, marking a significant distinction from al-Shayṭān, who is portrayed as a more static and one-dimensional character in the Qur'ān. Contrary to the common belief that there's no room for tragedy in Islam, Bodman's in-depth study of the Iblīs narrative reveals that elements of tragedy are present even in the Qur'ān, resonating with the perspectives of both medieval Sufi mystics and contemporary social critics.

Along this line, some Arabic literature critics have produced notable studies. Philip F. Kennedy (2016) explored "recognition" and showed its centrality in understanding how values and meaning are read into, or out of, a story. His case studies included some Qur'ānic and post-Qur'ānic narratives. Hoda El Shakry (2020) demonstrates how the Qur'ānic model of narratology enhances our understanding of literary sensibilities and practices in the Maghreb across Arabophone and Francophone traditions (see also Jones 1994; Norris 1983).

In an erudite examination of al-Tha'labī's *ʿArāʾis al-Majālis*, Marianna Klar (2009) perceives the tales of the prophets not merely as narratives but as intricate literary creations filled with depth and autonomy. Notably, her methodology carries a pronounced psychoanalytic dimension, focusing intently on the concealed emotional nuances within al-Tha'labī's compositions. She astutely demonstrates how the figures of the Qur'ānic stories, as retold by al-Tha'labī, stand as parables for the universal human condition, grappling with one's profound moral frailty in the face of temptation, responsibility, and loss.

In *The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt* (2005), Navid Kermani offers a nuanced exploration of the renowned Sufi scholar Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār’s (d. 618/1221) *Muṣibatnāma* (“The Book of Suffering”). Through the lens of Job’s narrative, ‘Aṭṭār delves into a profound counter-theological dispute regarding the apparent incongruities and afflictions present in God’s realm. The central conundrum posed is the reconciliation of human suffering and injustice with the foundational belief in a benevolent, loving, and merciful God. Using ‘Aṭṭār’s *Muṣibatnāma* as a foundational text, Kermani narrates the journey of this theological tension, epitomized by Job’s inquiry, throughout the three monotheistic traditions.

Pursuing a similar vein of inquiry into the Sufi interpretation of Qur’ānic narrative, Sa’diyya Shaikh (2012) revisited the retellings of certain Qur’ānic narratives by Ibn ‘Arabī through a feminist perspective. She interrogated concepts of selfhood, subjectivity, spirituality, and societal structures, thereby enriching the discourse on Islamic feminism and extending its implications for feminist ethics at large. More recently, Cyrus Ali Zargar (2017) explored the intimate relationship between storytelling and virtue ethics in Islamic philosophy and Sufism, illustrating how Qur’ānic narratives were rejuvenated through adaptations and retellings by Sufi scholars and philosophers.

In general, several ethical readings of the Qur’ān in recent decades have provided invaluable contributions both theoretically and analytically, including the philosophical study of Mohamed Abdallah Draz (1951), the linguistic analysis of Toshihiko Izutsu (1966), and the works of Fazlur Rahman (1980, 1983). Despite their ubiquitous presence, Qur’ānic narratives have not yet received their due recognition in literary and ethical studies.

5 Conclusion

Qur’ānic narratives have historically occupied a distinctive position in Islamic literature and scholarly discourse. While figures such as al-Ghazālī might have ranked these narratives lower in religious significance compared to theological and legal verses, their broad reception and the sheer volume of related manuscripts reveal a profound historical allure. Qur’ānic narratives were subjected to a myriad of interpretations, often enriched by extra-Qur’ānic materials drawn from biblical, post-biblical, and Arabic traditions. The primary objective was frequently to clarify ambiguous elements and fill interpretative gaps.

However, the academic marginalization of these narratives arose from various factors. These encompass debates over the normative authority of

previous prophetic laws, questions about prophetic infallibility, and apprehensions regarding the influence of external, often unauthenticated, materials on Qur'ānic tales. Such concerns frequently resulted in a cautious and tempered scholarly approach to these narratives.

The twentieth century saw a dynamic evolution in approaches, sources, and methodologies, heavily influenced by the Qur'ānic narratives recognized for their theological, moral, and literary depth. The contributions of pivotal figures such as 'Abduh, Riḍā, Quṭb, and Khalaf Allāh, *inter alia*, highlight the shifting interpretative landscape, accentuating the literary essence of the Qur'ānic narratives and embracing symbolic and allegorical insights that surpass mere historical perspectives.

In recent decades, Western scholarship on Qur'ānic studies has pivoted toward viewing the Qur'ān predominantly as a literary work. Scholars like Neuwirth, Antony Johns, and others have enriched our comprehension of the Qur'ānic narratives, examining their forms, structures, rhetorical techniques on the one hand, and spiritual, moral, and typological implications on the other.

That being said, it is worth noting that a significant gap remains in scholarship concerning Qur'ānic narratives, encompassing their reception history, as well as their legal, theological, and moral implications. Additionally, there is a notable deficiency in discussions regarding methods of interpreting these narratives as a literary genre and the challenges such interpretations encounter. Despite these challenges, the Qur'ānic narratives persist, epitomizing the richness of Islamic heritage. Contemporary scholars endeavor, not merely to understand these tales, but to derive ethical and moral guidance applicable to today's world. History, as ever, acts not just as a reflection of the past but also as a beacon illuminating our path forward.

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Sharpening Intuitive Knowledge

Sufi Storytelling for Instilling Virtues

Fatih Ermiş

The wisdom which is born of (human) nature and phantasy,
the wisdom which lacks the overflowing grace of the Light of
the Glorious (God).

The wisdom of this world brings increase of supposition and
doubt; the wisdom of the Religion soars above the sky.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 3202–3203



1 Introduction

In the classical ethics books that follow in the tradition of Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 653/1274), wisdom (*ḥikma*) is analyzed in two branches: theoretical wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-naẓariyya*) and practical wisdom (*al-ḥikma al-ʿamaliyya*) (Ṭūsī 1964, 27). Although it is advisable to acquire theoretical wisdom on its own, it does not guarantee a virtuous life (Ṭūsī 1964, 259).

Al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) emphasizes this idea in the introduction of his tract *Ay Farzand* (“O Son”), which he wrote to one of his students who had requested some advice: “O son, know that giving advice is easy. The difficulty lies in accepting (applying) the advice” (al-Ghazālī 1333, 92). As one reads the tract further, al-Ghazālī’s message becomes clear: Real knowledge can only be attained by practicing knowledge that is learned.

Since real knowledge (*ḥikma*), according to Sufis, is to see “things” as they really are, and since this seeing can only occur through the eye of the heart, in order to achieve real knowledge, the most important duty of a *sālik* is to purify their soul from all vices.

Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) regards wisdom (*ḥikma*) as something that cannot be achieved purely through intellectual pursuit. Instead, one reaches wisdom by linking intellectual pursuit with action: “Thus, the first, or theoretical, perfection is with respect to the other, or practical, perfection as form is to

matter. Neither can be complete without the other, for knowledge is a beginning and action an end. A beginning without an end is wasted, while an end without a beginning is impossible" (Miskawayh 1968, 37). For scholars of ethics, it was inconceivable that someone with bad character traits could be wise or vice versa.

The function of storytelling appears in the practical part of *ḥikma*. *Ḳinālīzāde* expresses this function as follows:

And one of the history books which is a good companion for the sultans is the *Shahnāma* of Firdawsī-yi Ṭūsī. A study of this book not only leads to courage and bravery but also transmits to the reader countless precious experiences.

KINALIZĀDE 2007, 468

Academic interest in the connection between Sufi storytelling and the transmission of virtues is recently growing. I would like to mention two such studies.

Yoones Dehghani Farsani's contribution to the recently published *Knowledge and Education in Classical Islam* (2020) is entitled "A Sufi Pedagogue: Some Educational Implications of Rūmī's Poetry." Although the main focus of this article is didactical aspects in Rūmī's (d. 672/1273) storytelling, since the ultimate aim of the Sufi didactics is purifying the soul, the article indirectly touches on the realm of virtues.

The second one is Cyrus Ali Zargar's *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (2017), a pioneer in highlighting and structurally analyzing the role of storytelling in ethics. The book is divided into two parts. The first part is dedicated to exploring this role following ethics texts from philosophers and scholars like Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 428/1037), al-Ghazālī, Miskawayh, Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 581/1185), Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191), and the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', fl. ca. third/ninth century). The second part investigates the connection between storytelling and ethics with regard to Sufi texts from Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/857), al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988), Bayāzīd Anṣārī (d. ca. 983/1575), Aṭṭār (d. 618/1221), and Rūmī. The last chapter in the second part is entitled "Virtue in the Narrative Poetry of Rūmī" and is mainly based on a relatively long story of *Mathnawī* ("Couplets"), the main actors of which are a deadly sick person, a Sufi, and a judge. Zargar discusses this tale in detail with quotations from parallel *Mathnawī* stories with similar ideas. The story's central idea was human justice versus divine justice, and hence Zargar connects the story to one of the essential concepts of ethics.

This chapter consists of two parts: In the first part, the difficulties of following the middle path will be discussed. This section will mainly focus on Ẹınālizzāde ‘Alī elebī’s (d. 979/1572) *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’* (“Alā’ Ethics”).¹ In the second part, the role of storytelling in overcoming these difficulties will be examined. Before getting into the discussion, it is necessary to give a short biography of Ẹınālizzāde, who is also known as Ibn Ẹinnā’.

2 Ẹınālizzāde’s Short Biography and His Work *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’*

Ẹınālizzāde ‘Alī elebī is the most influential moral philosopher in the history of the Ottoman Empire. He was not only a scholar and a judge but also a poet. As an author, Ẹınālizzāde demonstrated a high level of productivity. Although his numerous works span a broad range, from history to jurisprudence, he became known for his work *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’*.

Ẹınālizzāde comes from a family of scholars. His grandfather, ‘Abd al-Qadir Ẹamīdī Efendi (d. 877/1472), was a mentor to the heir to the throne Prince Mehmed II (d. 886/1481) (Atâ 1989, 164). Ẹınālizzāde’s father, Mīrī Emrullāh Efendi (d. 967/1559), and his brother Muslimī (d. 994/1586) were also poets and judges (Babinger 1927, 1093). After working as a judge in Bursa, Edirne, Damascus, Cairo, and Istanbul, Ẹınālizzāde was named Chief Judge for Anatolia (*Anadolu Kazaskeri*, second highest rank in the Ottoman Empire in legal matters) (Flügel 1977, 267). He died on 5 Ramaḡān 979/21 January 1572, induced by a blood poisoning in Edirne, where he was accompanying the sultan (Brockelmann 1909, 572).

Ẹınālizzāde wrote *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’* between 971/1563 and 973/1565 in Damascus, where he was the chief judge. In his *Quḡāt Dimashq* (“The Judges of Damascus”), Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 953/1546) quotes Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī al-Shāfi’ī’s (d. 984/1577) opinion that until that point, no better judge than Ẹınālizzāde had come to Damascus and that Ẹınālizzāde was preferable to all other Ottoman scholars (Ibn Ṭulūn 1956, 329). *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’* was the most popular and widely discussed ethical work in the Ottoman Empire. Adnan-Adivar mentions that *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’* was the basis of all textbooks of ethics until the end of the Ottoman Empire (Adivar 1955, 710). Mehmet Aynî, who wrote a review of ethics literature of the Ottomans in the early twentieth century, claimed that Ẹınālizzāde’s *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’* was by far the best ethical work in the Ottoman

1 Since quotations of the original terms will be from the *Akhlāq-i ‘Alā’* these quotations will slightly differ from standard Arabic orthography.

Empire (Aynî 1993, 80–81). In the introduction to his book, Kınālîzâde argues that as the previous ethics literature is Persian, it should now be considered obsolete (Kınālîzâde 2007, 42). Kınālîzâde asserts that he deliberately wrote his book in Turkish because of what he perceived to be a great need for Turkish-language ethics literature (Kınālîzâde 2007, 38).

The distinctive feature of *Akhlâq-i 'Alâî* is its extensive quotation of Sufi works. However, these references are also noticeable in earlier Sufi literature. In the preface to his work *Awṣāf al-Ashrāf* (“The Qualities of the Descendants of the Prophet”), Naṣîr al-Dîn Ṭūsî (d. 672/1273) mentions that after writing his work *Akhlâq-i Nâṣirî* (“Nâṣirean Ethics”), he always intended to write a treatise on the *awliyâ*’s (friends of God) insight on this matter, which he was prevented from doing for a long time (Ṭūsî 1369, 3–4). Jalâl al-Dîn Dawwânî (d. 907/1501) quotes in his *Akhlâq-i Jalâlî* (“Jalâlî Ethics”), a dream of Shihâb al-Dîn Maqtûl Suhrawardî (d. 587/1191) from his *Talwîḥât* (“Metonymies”), in which Suhrawardî and Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) start a conversation. Aristotle accompanies Suhrawardî to his teacher Plato (d. 348 BCE). They continue the conversation, and Suhrawardî asks Plato if there is a philosopher of Plato’s caliber in his own time. Plato replies that not one possessing even a seventy-thousandth of him exists. Suhrawardî then mentions the names of great Muslim philosophers. Still, Plato does not show any interest in them until Suhrawardî mentions the names of some Sufi masters like Junayd Baghdādî (d. 297/910), Abû Yazîd al-Bisṭāmî (d. 261/875), and Sahl ibn ‘Abd Allâh al-Tustarî (d. 283/896). Plato answers, “They deserve the name philosopher” (Dawwânî 1911, 14).

2.1 *Analysis of the Soul (Nafs)*

In the framework of classical ethics, virtue exists at the midpoint between two extremes. Before discussing the difficulties of finding the midpoint, it is necessary to examine how the soul (*nafs*) was understood by scholars of ethics since their analyses are what the discipline is based on.

Scholars of ethics talk about three kinds of souls: the vegetative soul, the animal soul, and the human soul. The animal soul includes the vegetative soul, and the human soul includes both of them.

2.1.1 The Vegetative Soul (*Nafs-i Nabâtî*)

The characteristic feature of the vegetative soul is the appetitive faculty, which is divided into four main components:

1. Nutritive faculty (*ghādîya*)
2. Augmentative faculty (*nāmiya*)

3. Faculty of generation (*muwallida*)
4. Faculty of shaping (*muşawwira*)

2.1.2 The Animal Soul (*Nafs-i Haywānī*)

The animal soul has two characteristic faculties:

1. The faculty of organic perception (*quwwat-i mudrika*), which consists of external senses (*hawāss-i zāhira*) and internal senses (*hawāss-i bāṭina*). External senses are the commonly known five senses. Inner senses are also five in number: common sense (*ḥiss-i mushtarak*), fantasy (*khayāl*), estimation (*wāhima*), memory (*ḥāfiẓa*), and reflection (*mutaṣarrifa*).
2. The faculty of voluntary motion (*quwwat-i muḥarrika*), which can be the result of either appetitive faculty (*quwwat-i shahawiyya*) or irascible faculty (*quwwat-i ghaḍabiyya*).

2.1.3 The Human Soul (*Nafs-i Insānī*)

The human soul has two characteristic faculties:

1. The faculty of reasoning (*quwwat-i ʿālīma*), which may be realized either from the perspective of theoretical wisdom (*ḥikmat-i naẓariyya*) or from the perspective of practical wisdom (*ḥikmat-i ʿamaliyya*).
2. The faculty of practicing (*quwwat-i ʿāmila*)

As mentioned, the animal soul includes the faculties of the vegetative soul, and the human soul includes the faculties of both animal and vegetative souls. In this regard, four main faculties of the human soul can be listed as follows:

1. Appetitive faculty (*quwwat-i shahawiyya*) (common with plants and animals), also called the bestial soul (*nafs-i bahīmī*).
2. Irascible faculty (*quwwat-i ghaḍabiyya*) (common with animals), also called the savage soul (*nafs-i sabūʿī*).
3. Rational faculty (*quwwat-i naẓariyya*) (common with angels), also called the angelic soul (*nafs-i malakī*).
4. Practical faculty (*quwwat-i ʿamaliyya*)

2.2 Virtues Lie in the Middle

The four faculties of the human soul form the basis of the analysis of virtues. Each one of these four faculties has two extremes (*ifrāt* and *tafrīt*), and the four cardinal virtues lie exactly in the middle of these two extremes.

The *ifrāt* of the appetitive faculty is greed, and the *tafrīt* of it is sluggishness. The middle point between these two extremes is continence.

The *ifrāt* of the irascible faculty is foolhardiness, and the *tafrīt* of it is cowardice. The middle point between these two extremes is courage.

The *ifrāt* of the rational faculty is ingenuity, and the *tafrīt* of it is foolishness. The middle point between these two extremes is wisdom.

The *ifrāt* of the practical faculty is committing injustice, and the *tafrīt* of it is suffering from injustice. The middle point between these two extremes is justice.

According to another interpretation of the practical faculty, there are no two extremes. Rather, justice has only one extreme: injustice (*ẓulm*). If a person follows the middle points of the other virtues, they are decidedly a just person. Although from one perspective, justice is one of the four cardinal virtues, from another perspective, justice includes all other virtues because being just means following the middle points between two extremes.

Justice is the most honorable of virtues because it is equated with equality since it is the sum of the middle points which lie at an equal distance to both extremes. Ḳinālīzāde interprets equality as two things essentially being one. Therefore, equality leads to unity (*waḥdat*), and unity is the most honorable attribute because it points towards returning to the One (God) (Ḳinālīzāde 2007, 135).

2.3 *Relative Middle and Absolute Middle*

With respect to the middle path, Ḳinālīzāde distinguishes between an absolute and a relative middle. The absolute middle is the arithmetic midpoint, in the same way that four is in the middle of two and six. However, this is utterly irrelevant to ethics. The relative midpoint is an essential instrument for analyzing the human character. In this regard, virtues (the middle points between two extremes) differ for each individual. Moreover, virtues change at different stages of human life in accordance with changing circumstances. A particular trait may be a virtue for one individual but a vice for another, or it may be a virtue for an individual at one stage of their life but a vice at another (Ḳinālīzāde 2007, 118). Ḳinālīzāde here refers to the definition of justice as *waḍʿ al-shayʿ fī mawḍiʿih* (putting everything in the right place).² These right places (or the golden mean between two extremes) must be determined personally and in a dynamic process.

2.4 *Upward and Downward Realisation of Justice*

According to this understanding, justice (*ʿadālat*) is equated with balance (*iʿtidāl*). Each individual must first attain balance in their soul (in other words,

2 This definition of justice can also be found in the *Mathnawī*. Rūmī replies to the question of “what is justice” as “giving water to trees.” The answer to “what is injustice” is “to give water to thorns.” Rūmī further argues that justice is bestowing a bounty in its proper place. It is not justice to give water to all roots disregarding whether the water will reach a tree or thorn. Similarly, putting collyrium in the ear is not right, because the proper place for collyrium is the eye. While justice is bestowing a bounty in its proper place, injustice is “to bestow it in an improper place” (Rūmī 1925–1940, vol. 5, couplets 1089–1095).

the middle path between extremes (*ifrāt* and *tafrīt*). Justice then influences the family because just individuals form just families. A society comprised of righteous families will create a just society governed by a righteous monarch. We can call this principle upward justice. It also applies the other way around. A society ruled by a righteous monarch will form righteous families, and righteous families will raise righteous individuals (downright righteousness).

Ideas about upward and downward justice can also be found in the writing of Michel Foucault (d. 1984). Foucault criticizes the singularity of the prince at Machiavelli (d. 1527) and argues, concerning La Mothe Le Vayer (d. 1672), for the diversity of forms of government. Three main forms are identical to the ideas of Kınalızāde: “The art of self-government, connected with morality; the kind of governing a family in a proper way, which belongs to economy; and finally, the science of ruling the state, which concerns politics” (Foucault 1991, 91). Upward continuity for Foucault means that a person who wants to govern a state effectively must first learn how to control himself and his wealth. Downward continuity means “when a state is well run, the head of the family wants to know what to look for after his family, his goods and his patrimony, which means that individual wants, in turn, behave as they should” (Foucault 1991, 91).

2.5 *Difficulties of Finding the Middle Path*

Since finding the middle path is the basis of the virtues, the difficulties of finding the middle path are critical. There are two main difficulties in this regard:

1. As the distance between two extremes is not measurable, one cannot find the middle point easily. Therefore, one must develop intuition to *feel* for the middle point. Whoever can develop such strong intuition follows the middle path naturally:

The character of justice stems from the mixture of wisdom, temperance, and courage. When these three characters are together and interact with each other, a vague form comes into being. And this form ideally includes all of the virtues, and it is called justice.

KINALIZÂDE 2007, 101

2. Even if we assume that one succeeds in finding the middle point, the middle points change over time according to circumstances.

A certain amount of donation may be an act of generosity for a person when they are poor, but the same amount of donation may be an act of parsimony when they are rich. Similarly, for a certain act of courage, someone may be considered courageous when they are weak, and for the same act of courage, the same person may be regarded as a coward when they become stronger.

2.6 *Combination of Knowledge and Action*

The difficulties of finding the middle path can only be overcome by combining knowledge and action. Only through practicing the middle path (which is nothing but justice) can the intuition for finding the middle path be strengthened. As Miskawayh puts it: "It is not sufficient to know the virtues; one must also apply and practice them" (Miskawayh 1968: 153). Accordingly, their feeling for the right path (or justice) strengthens whenever a person takes the right action. With stronger intuition, the person recognizes the right action even better. Ṭūsī also counsels to be wise in words and deeds both: "for wisdom in speech remains in this world, but wisdom in deeds reaches the other world and endures there" (Ṭūsī 1964, 259). This interaction between knowledge of virtues and practicing this knowledge strengthens both knowledge and practice with time: "He continues in this way until he attains the rank of the philosophers, that is to say until his knowledge becomes true and his action right" (Miskawayh 1968, 154).

3 The Role of Storytelling in Achieving Virtues

There are auxiliary methods of developing this feeling for the right action. One of the most important of them is receiving the morals transmitted in Sufi storytelling, which is also an imitation of the Qur'ān since around one-fourth of the Qur'ān also consists of storytelling. By listening to the stories of Rūmī, 'Aṭṭār, Sanā'ī (d. ca. 525/1131), etc., it is hoped that the listener can develop a feeling towards the right action.

Ḳinālizāde examines the seven qualities of an ideal sultan. The second of these qualities is the incisiveness of opinion and thinking. Ḳinālizāde argues that this quality can be acquired in two ways:

The first one is being endowed with a high level of intelligence and a pure intellect according to the verse, "Such is God's favor. He grants it to whomever He will" (Q 5:54).³

The second occurs through trial and experience. Certainly, this way requires more time and presupposes the person will become old enough to acquire such vast experience. However, there is a shortcut. One can read stories from history books and benefit from the experiences of people who recorded the difficulties they endured. Ḳinālizāde argues that in this way, one can acquire these experiences without paying the price for them. One book he strongly recommends is Firdawsī's (d. 411/1020) *Shāhnāma*, the literature of which, according to

3 All Qur'ānic quotations are from Abdel Haleem's translation (2004).

Ḳinālīzāde, not only increases the courage of the reader but contains innumerable other valuable experiences. (Ḳinālīzāde 2007, 468). He further explains his endeavors to accumulate knowledge of stories from history books, starting from Keyumars, the first king of the world according to *Shāhnāma*, to his own day (Ḳinālīzāde 2007, 476).

In the following section, I will discuss the role of this literature through an exploration of some excerpts from Rūmī's *Mathnawī*.

3.1 *The Issue of Relativity in Following the Middle Path*

As discussed, the absolute middle is irrelevant to ethics, while the relative middle is a central concept. However, locating the relative middle in the dynamic process of changing contexts is not easy. Nevertheless, through the literature of one of the *Mathnawī* stories, it is possible to contextualize Ḳinālīzāde's theoretical explanations. The story is about the companions of a particular Sufi, who complain about him in the presence of their *shaykh*. They claim that he breaks three main principles of purification of the soul: he eats too much, sleeps too much, and talks too much.

The companions go to the *shaykh* with their complaint, and their spokesman tells him that "this Sufi has three annoying habits":

In speech, he is garrulous as a bell; in eating, he eats more than twenty persons;

And if he sleeps, he is like the Men of the Cave. (Thus) did the Sufis march to war (against him) before the *shaykh*?

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 3509–3510

Men of the Cave refers to the story of a small group of young believers who escaped from a cruel ruler and sought refuge in a cave where they slept for more than three hundred years (see Q 18, al-Kahf (The Cave)). With the above statement, the Sufis mean that their companion Sufi breaks three essential rules: *qillat al-ṭa'ām* (to eat little), *qillat al-manām* (to sleep little), *qillat al-kalām* (to speak little). Ḳinālīzāde also mentions this principle, citing 'Abd al-Khālīq Ghijduwānī (d. 575/1179), a great Naqshbandī master. At the end of *Akhlaq-i 'Alā'ī*, he puts Ghijduwānī's testament following Plato's and Aristotle's testaments as a conclusion of the whole book. The formulation in this testament is as follows: *az sōyle, az ye, az uyu* (speak little, eat little, sleep little) (Ḳinālīzāde 2007, 542).

Rūmī is not an impartial teller of this story, and even at the beginning of the story, he comments that the Sufis went too far in their complaint. Nonetheless, the *shaykh* asks the accused Sufi to explain the behaviors that had perturbed the other Sufis in the convent. The *shaykh* further advises him that the middle

path is the best, referring to a hadith *khayr al-umūr awṣaṭuhā* (the best things are the middle ones). To clarify and emphasize the righteousness of the middle path, the *shaykh* comments on the humoral theory and repeats the well-known main principle of Galenic medicine: the human body is healthy so long as the four humors are in balance. As soon as one humor goes beyond its limits and claims to rule over the other three humors, the health of the body deteriorates. Rūmī brings *ʿadālat* (justice) and *iʿtidāl* (balance) in one line and indeed equates them because justice means to follow a balanced way between two extremes.

Continuing with the *sūrat al-Kahf* (Q 18), the *shaykh* also quotes the story of Moses and Khidr. At the beginning of their journey, Khidr warned Moses that he predicted Moses would not demonstrate patience in response to his actions. On the other hand, Moses promises him that “God willing, you will find me patient. I will not disobey you in any way” (Q 18:69). Upon this agreement, Moses was not supposed to question Khidr’s deeds until he himself explained them. However, contrary to his promise, Moses was not able to remain silent about three things that Khidr did: making a hole in the boat, killing a young boy, and repairing a wall without any payment in return.

The *shaykh* says that the speech of Moses was measured, “but even so, it exceeded the words of his good friend.”

That excess resulted in [his] opposing Khaḍir, and he (Khaḍir) said, “Go, thou art one that talks too much: *this is a [cause of] separation [between us]*.”⁴

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplet 3516

The *shaykh* explains to the Sufi that the middle path is determined according to context. Moses asked only three questions; in another context, this speech may have been seen as being altogether measured. However, in the specific context of his friendship with Khidr, his speech was excessive. The Sufi later applies the same logic to explain the reasons behind his own actions.

Before revealing the Sufi’s answer, Rūmī points out the resemblance of his answer to that of Khidr. The Sufi was able to respond correctly because he had, as paraphrased by Rūmī, inheritance from Khidr (guided by Khidr). He begins his answer with the following sentence:

Although the middle path is (the way of) wisdom, the middle path too is relative.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplet 3531

⁴ *Hādhā firāq* (this is a separation) refers to Q 18:78.

Using Sufi's reasoning, Rūmī provides an immediate formulation of the relativity of the middle path. What is relative here are not the virtues themselves but the middle paths. There is no doubt that courage is a virtue. However, the same mode of action may be an act of courage in one context and an act of cowardice in another. The Sufi gives more examples of the relativity of the middle path:

Relatively to a camel, the water in the stream is tiny, but it is like the ocean to a mouse.

If anyone has an appetite for four loaves and eats two or three, that is the mean;

But if he eats all four, it is far from the mean: he is in bondage to greed, like a duck.

If one has an appetite for ten loaves and eats six, know that that is the mean. When I have an appetite for fifty loaves and you for (no more than) six scones, we are not equivalent.

You may be tired by ten *rak'as* (of prayer), but I may not be worn thin by five hundred.

One goes barefoot (all the way) to the Ka'ba, and one becomes beside himself (with exhaustion in going) as far as the mosque.

One in utter self-devotion gives his life, one is agonized at giving a single loaf.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplet 3532–3539

The examples cited in these verses demonstrate the issue of relativity to the reader. Following the middle path means to be measured in action, which means not being excessive in things like speech, appetite, sleep, etc. The *shaykh* also describes Moses's speech as measured. However, in the context of this story, it was considered beyond measure. In the previous examples, satisfying the whole appetite is beyond measure and far from the middle path, which remains considerably below the satisfaction level of the appetite. However, complete ignorance of the faculty of appetite is also an extreme (*tafrīt*) and hence a vice. Although the middle path is located between the complete satisfaction of appetite and total ignorance of it, the middle path differs for each person since the whole satisfaction point is different for each person. After these examples, Rūmī discusses a specific case of the middle path:

This mean belongs to (the realm of) the finite, for that (finite) has a beginning and end.

A beginning and end are necessary so that the mean or middle (point) between them may be conceived in imagination.

Inasmuch as the infinite has not (these) two limits, how should the mean be applicable to it?

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplet 3540–3542

The case of this Sufi goes beyond these explanations since the two ends are infinite in this situation. Between two infinities, any point can be regarded as the middle path. The third complaint about this Sufi was that he slept too much. The Sufi explains this habit of his as follows:

Know that my eyes are asleep, (but) my heart is awake: know that my (seemingly) inactive form is (really) in action.

The Prophet said, “My eyes sleep, (but) my heart is not asleep to the Lord of created beings.”

Your eyes are awake, and your heart is sunk in slumber; my eyes are asleep, (but) my heart is in (contemplation of) the opening of the door (of Divine grace).

My heart hath five senses other (than the physical): both the worlds (external and spiritual) are the stage (theatre) for the senses of the heart.

...

(Whilst) I am dwelling with you in some place on the earth, I am coursing over the seventh sphere (of Heaven), like Saturn.

’Tis not I that am seated beside you, ’tis my shadow: my rank is higher than (the reach of) thoughts.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 3548–3552, 3555–3556

This explanation is based on the infinity argument, according to which any mode of action becomes the middle path. However, Rūmī describes this case as a rare exception, valid only for some exceptional servants of God, like Khidr. This Sufi was described at the beginning of the story as guided by Khidr.

After a careful reading, it becomes clear that this story has two layers. The story of the Sufi and the *shaykh* is the first layer. Beneath this story lies the story of Moses and Khidr. To discuss another aspect of this relativity, Rūmī refers to another story of Moses, this time between Moses and a shepherd.

3.2 *Relativity in Right and Wrong*

One day, Moses saw a shepherd on his way who was praying to God with inappropriate praises in the following form:

Where art Thou, that I may become Thy servant and sew Thy shoes and comb Thy head?

That I may wash Thy clothes and kill Thy lice and bring milk to Thee, O
 worshipful One;
 That I may kiss Thy little hand and rub Thy little foot, (and when) bed-
 time comes I may sweep Thy little room,
 O Thou to whom all my goats be a sacrifice, O Thou in remembrance of
 whom are my cries of ay and ah!

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 1721–1724

Since Moses was unsure to whom this strange praise was addressed, he asked the shepherd directly and was told the speech was addressed to the One who created us. Hearing this answer, Moses became frantic and blamed the shepherd as follows:

“Hark!” said Moses, “you have become very backsliding (depraved);
 indeed, you have not become a Moslem, you have become an infidel.
 What babble is this? What blasphemy and raving? Stuff some cotton into
 your mouth!
 The stench of your blasphemy has made the (whole) world stinking: your
 blasphemy has turned the silk robe of religion into rags.”

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 1727–1729

The shepherd conceived God as being humanlike and thus attributed God with human traits, such as the need to sleep, be caressed, drink milk, etc. The shepherd even offered to kill his lice, sew his shoes, and wash his clothes. After this harsh rebuke, Moses began to explain to the shepherd why these words were inappropriate. Rūmī focuses on this point of the story. Moses uses the argument of relativity, explaining to the shepherd that the services he offered to God would be appropriate had they been offered to a human being. However, their being offered to a God who is far from possessing material or immaterial needs was inappropriate.

Shoes and socks are fitting for you, (but) how are such things right for
 (One who is) a Sun?

...

(Only) he that is waxing and growing drinks milk: (only) he that has need
 of feet puts on shoes.

...

If you should call a man “Fátima”—though men and women are all of
 one kind—

He will seek to murder you, so far as it is possible (for him), albeit he is good-natured and forbearing and quiet.

(The name) Fátima is (a term of) praise in regard to women, (but) if you address it to a man, 'tis (like) the blow of a spearhead.

Hand and foot are (terms of) praise in relation to us; in relation to the holiness of God they are pollution.

(The words) *He begat not, He was not begotten* are appropriate to Him: He is the Creator of begetter and begotten.

Birth is the attribute of everything that is (a) body: whatever is born is on this side of the river,

Because it is of (the world of) becoming and decay and (is) contemptible: it is originated and certainly requires an Originator.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 1730, 1736, 1741–1747

Referring to the definition of injustice (*ẓulm*) as “putting something in a wrong place,” Moses meant that the shepherd committed an injustice by offering God services that He does not need and which are only appropriate to offer human beings. Even the name Fatima, which may be regarded as praise for being the name of the prophet’s daughter, may result in a serious altercation if used to address a man. The reason is that the speaker puts something (the praise of being called Fatima) in the wrong place (using it to address a man). Similarly, if a person shows their love to someone by declaring themselves ready to provide service in the form of washing clothes, killing lice, offering milk, kissing hands, rubbing feet, sweeping their room, sewing shoes, etc., this would be appropriate (or in other words just). However, it is inappropriate and misplaced (or unjust) if this person offers such services to God.

The shepherd comprehended his mistake upon clarification from Moses and expressed his remorse in the following way: “O Moses, thou hast closed my mouth and thou hast burned my soul with repentance” (Rūmī 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplet 1749).

When the shepherd left Moses, God rebuked Moses on account of the shepherd.

A revelation came to Moses from God—“Thou hast parted My servant from Me.

Didst thou come (as a prophet) to unite, or didst thou come to sever?

So far as thou canst, do not set foot in separation: of (all) things, the most hateful to Me is divorce.”

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 1750–1752

In this revelation, God emphasizes Moses's primary duty as a prophet and criticizes him for forgetting this during his conversation with the shepherd. After this, God explained to Moses that he gave every creature a peculiar expression.

In regard to him, it is (worthy of) praise, and in regard to thee, it is (worthy of) blame: in regard to him honey, and in regard to thee poison.
I am independent of all purity and impurity, of all slothfulness and alacrity (in worshipping Me).

...

I am not sanctified by their glorification (of Me); 'tis they that become sanctified and pearl-scattering (pure and radiant).
I look not at the tongue and the speech; I look at the inward (spirit) and the state (of feeling).

...

How much (more) of these phrases and conceptions and metaphors? I want burning, burning; become friendly with that burning!
Light up a fire of love in thy soul, burn thought and expression entirely (away)!

...

If he (the lover) speak faultily, do not call him faulty; and if he be bathed in blood, do not wash (those who are) martyrs.
For martyrs, blood is better than water: this fault (committed by him) is better than a hundred right actions (of another).
Within the Ka'ba the rule of the *qibla* does not exist: what matters if the diver has no snow-shoes?

...

The religion of Love is apart from all religions: for lovers, the (only) religion and creed is—God.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets, 1754–1755, 1758–1759, 1762–1763, 1766–1769, 1770

God's critique against Moses was based on the same argument of relativity that Moses had used against the shepherd, i.e., putting something in the wrong place. Just as Moses had told the shepherd that offering services to God that are suitable for human beings is an injustice (*ẓulm*), God told Moses that the same words, if they were spoken by Moses (who is a prophet and knows well which forms of praise of God are appropriate), would be poison for him, whereas for the shepherd they may be honey. Although the words of the shepherd were utterly inappropriate, this aspect was not significant from God's perspective. Rūmī then gives further examples of how the same things may be right or wrong according to changing contexts. Although blood is regarded as impure

in Islamic jurisprudence, it should not be washed away if a martyr has blood on their body because it is much more valuable than water. In one context, blood is impure, and in another, it is pure. Therefore, it is possible that the inappropriate praises of the shepherd may be more valuable than the appropriate praises of another person from another context. This is because even seemingly appropriate praises are still largely deficient concerning his exalted name. Rūmī explores the same point in the following story. As it is common in the *Mathnawī* to open a parenthesis and start new stories before concluding the current one, I would like to discuss the story of an Arab and the caliph here and then continue with the rest of the Moses and shepherd story.

A poor Arab from the desert decided with his wife to go to the caliph in Baghdad, hoping to get some financial help. Since they were extremely poor, the only gift the Arab could find to offer to the caliph was rainwater he had collected in the desert. Like the shepherd, who could only conceive the world and express his praise of God through the language of his pastoral way of life, this Arab from the desert believed that there was also a scarcity of water in Baghdad. Therefore, he and his wife thought that the caliph had never tasted such water: “Who has such a gift as this? This, truly, is worthy of a King like him” (Rūmī 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplet 2715). Of course, he and his wife did not know that the Tigris passes through Baghdad, with water “sweet as sugar,” as Rūmī expresses it.

When the Arab arrived at the palace of the caliph, he handed his gift to the officials. They smiled at this gift but, at the same time, accepted it as though it were as precious as life. When the caliph saw the gift and heard his story, he filled the jug with gold and ordered his officials to lead him through the Tigris on his return home.

When he (the Arab) embarked in the boat and beheld the Tigris, he was
prostrating himself in shame and bowing (his head),
Saying, “Oh, wonderful is the kindness of that bounteous King, and ’tis
(even) more wonderful that he took that water.
How did that Sea of munificence so quickly accept from me such spuri-
ous coin as this?”

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplets 2857–2859

According to the motto, “I look not at the tongue and the speech; I look at the inward (spirit) and the state (of feeling)” (Rūmī 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplet 1759), the caliph just ignored the impropriety of his gift.

Returning to the story of Moses and the shepherd, following the divine rebuke, Moses ran into the desert to find the shepherd. When Moses finally

found him, he told the shepherd that God had permitted him to say whatever his heart desired and in whatever manner he liked.

However, the shepherd replied:

O Moses, I have passed beyond that: I am now bathed in (my) heart's blood.

I have passed beyond the Lote-tree of the farthest bourn, I have gone a hundred thousand years' journey on the other side.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 1787–1788

The main conclusion Rūmī derives from this story is the following:

This acceptance (by God) of your praise is from (His) mercy: it is an indulgence (which He grants), like (the indulgence granted in the case of) the prayers of a woman suffering from menorrhagia.

Her prayers are stained with blood; your praise is stained with assimilation and qualification.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 2, couplets 1797–1798

The words of the shepherd were undoubtedly wrong. However, God is beyond right or wrong. Even if what is right appears closer to God from a human perspective, even this is far from his exalted name. Rūmī explores this point further in the following story:

3.3 *Following Adab Is More Important than Right or Wrong*

Rūmī prefaces one of his stories with this:

How Adam imputed that fault (which he had committed) to himself, saying, “O Lord, we have done wrong” (Q 7:23), and how Iblīs imputed his own sin to God, saying, “Because Thou hast seduced me” (Q 7:16).

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, 81

At the beginning of this story, Rūmī discusses the issue of free will and to what extent our deeds belong to us.

Consider both our action and the action of God. Regard our action as existent. This is manifest.

If the action of created beings be not in the midst (obviously existent), then say not to any one, “Why have you acted thus?”

The creative act of God brings our actions into existence: our actions are the effects of the creative act of God.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplets 1480–1482

According to Rūmī, from one perspective, human action originates from humans themselves, and from another perspective, it originates from God. These two perspectives are simultaneously valid and do not negate one another. In the same way that one cannot look ahead of and behind themselves, only God can comprehend how these two perspectives are concurrently valid. While Rūmī considers the appropriateness of emphasizing either aspect, he particularly highlights the context of (practicing) *adab*.

Satan said *Because Thou hast seduced me*: the vile Devil concealed his own act.

Adam said *We had done wrong unto ourselves*: he was not, like us, unheeding of the action of God.

From respect, he concealed it (the action of God) in (regard to) the sin: by casting the sin upon himself, he ate fruit (was blessed).

After his repentance, He (God) said to him, “O Adam, did not I create in thee that sin and (those) tribulations? Was it not My foreordainment and destiny? How didst thou conceal that at the time of excusing thyself?”

He (Adam) said, “I was afraid, (so) I did not let respect go (did not fail to observe due respect).” He (God) said, “I too have observed it towards thee.”

Whoever brings reverence gets reverence (in return): whoever brings sugar eats almond-cake.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplets 1488–1494

After narrating the story of Adam, Iblis, and the angels, Rūmī questions why Adam was blessed while Iblis was damned forever, even though both of them had committed the same sin (eating from the forbidden tree and refusing to prostrate). Rūmī says that Adam concealed the action of God in the sin he committed by casting the sin entirely upon himself. When, after had repented, God asked him why he had concealed the act of God; Adam answered that it was out of respect. Iblis, on the other hand, attributed his sin to God and concealed his own actions instead of begging God for forgiveness. Rūmī describes his actions as contrary to being respectful and attributes this to why he was cursed.

The crucial point here is whether it is appropriate to attribute the deed to God, disregarding the point that, indeed, all actions originate from God.

Ḳinālīzāde touches on this issue with an example from Abraham. He quotes the Qur'ānic verse, "the Lord of the Worlds, who created me. It is He who guides me; He who gives me food and drink; He who cures me when I am ill" (Q 26:77–80). Ḳinālīzāde discusses the significance of respect with the words of Abraham in the following way:

He did not say, "It is He who makes me sick and afterward cures me," because illness in its appearance is evil. Therefore he did not attribute it to God but attributed it to himself.

KINALIZÂDE 2007, 291–292

A similar attitude can be observed in the previous story of Moses and Khidr. When Moses fails to have patience with his friend's actions three times, Khidr tells him "This is where you and I part company" after which he explains to Moses the reasons for his actions. Concerning the boy that Khidr killed, he says, "The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and we feared that⁵ he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief" (Q 18:80). As for the wall, which Khidr repaired without receiving payment, although he and Moses felt tired and hungry at that time, and although the residents of the village refused to give them any food, he tells Moses that this wall belonged to two orphans. There was a treasure underneath this wall. He repaired the wall to prevent the disclosure of this treasure before the two orphans became adults: "so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from your Lord" (Q 18:83).

Since killing a boy is evil in its appearance (even if the ultimate result of this deed is a blessing both for the boy and his parents), Khidr formulates his explanation here as *fa-khashīnā* (so we feared), and in this way, he attributes this deed to himself. On the contrary, since repairing a wall is a blessing both in its reality and appearance, he attributes this deed to God, saying *fa-arāda rabbuka* (so your Lord intended).

These examples show that for Sufis and ethics scholars alike, real knowledge (*ḥikma*) can only be achieved by practicing knowledge. *Adab* is a guideline for this practice. The following story shows another example of this practice.

3.4 Four Qualities of Humankind, Which Are the Crucifix of Reason

Achieving *ḥikma* requires a specific kind of intellect (*'aql*), which is different from usual human reason. The connection with ethics appears precisely at

5 Abdel Haleem's translation goes here as "and so, fearing," which is not a correct translation of *fa-khashīnā*.

this point. This kind of intellect can be achieved (or instead activated because every human being can potentially possess it) only by eliminating vices from the soul. In another story, Rūmī mentions four vices: greed, lust, eminence, and desire. He describes these four vices as the crucifix of reason.

The story is about when Abraham asked God, “My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead” (Q 2:260). The Qur’ān says that God ordained Abraham to take four birds and train them to return to him. After this, Abraham was supposed to kill the four birds and put their meat on separate hilltops. When he called the four birds back, they came flying to him.

The version of the story in the Qur’ān does not give any clues as to which kind of four birds these were. In the *Mathnawī* version, however, these four birds are reported as a duck, peacock, crow, and cock, symbolizing greed, lust, eminence, and (worldly) desire.

O thou whose intelligence is (resplendent) as the Sun, thou art the Khalīl
(Abraham) of the time: kill these four birds that infest the Way.

...

If thou wish the people to have everlasting life, cut off the heads of these
four foul and evil birds.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 5, couplet 31, 38

Rūmī explains that the killing of four birds symbolizes the killing of the four vices of the human soul. As long as these four vices have not been killed, the secret of “how God gives life to the dead” cannot be learned.

If the heart is polished of its vices (the extremes), the person achieves a balanced state and treads the path of virtues. The following story further elucidates this point.

3.5 *Real Knowledge (Ḥikma) Can Only Be Achieved through Polishing the Heart*

In another story of the *Mathnawī*, a sultan held a painting competition to determine who would paint the most enormous hall in his palace. Since the Rūm⁶ and Chinese were especially famous for this kind of art, he invited the best painters to this competition. The sultan’s men divided the hall in the middle with a curtain, and both teams started working. The Chinese requested the

6 Rūm has been translated by Nicholson as the Greeks. In some contexts, Rūm may denote the Greeks. However, in a more general context, Rūm denotes the population of the territories of the former Eastern Roman Empire including Turks, Kurds, Armenians, Persians, Arabs, Tajiks, etc. Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn’s nickname, Rūmī, is also meant in this sense.

king to give them a hundred colors. The Rūm, on the other hand, demanded nothing except materials to remove the rust. At the appointed hour, the sultan entered the hall and looked first at the wall of the Chinese painters. He saw images that were robbing him of his wits.

When the sultan looked at the wall of the Rūm, the pictures painted by the Chinese seemed more beautiful and, in a fashion snatching the eye from the socket.

The Greeks, O father, are the Súfis: (they are) without (independent of)
study and books and erudition,
But they have burnished their breasts (and made them) pure from greed
and cupidity and avarice and hatred.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplets 3483–3484

Polishing the wall painted by the Rūm is likened to polishing the heart's walls by purifying the soul of all kinds of vices, like greed, cupidity, avarice, and hatred. If a person achieves this state, God's light can only be reflected from their heart's mirror. This is because all other existent beings in the universe are limited. However, a pure heart and God have no limits. Therefore, the only suitable instrument in the universe to reflect God's light is the heart of a perfected man (*insān kāmīl*).

Although that form is not contained in Heaven, nor the empyrean nor the
sphere of the stars, nor (in the earth which rests) on the Fish,
Because (all) those are bounded and numbered—(yet is it contained in
the heart): know that the mirror of the heart hath no bound.
Here the understanding becomes silent, or (else) it leads to error because
the heart is with Him (God), or indeed the heart is He.

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplets 3487–3489

The identification of the heart of a perfected man with God becomes so close that Sufis describe it as nearly impossible to differentiate such a heart from God. Maḥmūd Shabistārī (d. after 737/1337), for example, uses the analogy of a mole on God's face to elucidate the intimacy of God and heart.

I know not if His mole is the reflection of my heart,
Or my heart, the reflection of the mole on that fair face.

SHABISTARĪ 1880, 77, couplet 796

Polishing the heart, not only from vices but from all created existents, is a goal set by most Sufis, as it is believed to be the only way to achieve unity

(*waḥdat*). Such heart, as paraphrased by Rūmī, acquires knowledge free from form and husk:

They have relinquished the form and husk of knowledge, they have raised
the banner of the eye of certainty.

...

Though they have let go grammar (*naḥw*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*), yet
they have taken up (instead) mystical self effacement (*maḥw*) and
spiritual poverty (*faqr*).

RŪMĪ 1925–1940, vol. 1, couplets 3493, 3497

4 Conclusion

As *Mathnawī* has been regarded as an imitation of the Qurʾān in the Persian language by some Sufis, most stories in the *Mathnawī* are either based on a Qurʾānic story or an expansion of it. The first two *Mathnawī* stories discussed here refer to the story of Moses and Khidr. Since Moses is regarded as the apex of exoteric sciences and Khidr of esoteric sciences, the story between Moses and the shepherd is based on connotations from this perspective. In the story of the complaint of some Sufis about their companion Sufi in front of their *shaykh*, this relation is even more explicit. As for the third story, it is known to the readers of *Mathnawī* that in *Mathnawī*, one can find numerous titles in the form of “in the exposition of the following Qurʾānic verse.” The third story exposes the verse “Because Thou hast seduced me.” The fourth story is an expansion of another Qurʾānic story. The Qurʾān is very brief in Abraham’s question to God about the creation and his request to kill four birds. Rūmī not only specifies these four birds but also gives the story an utterly mystic dimension by characterizing these four birds with four traits. The story between the Chinese and the Rūm goes back to al-Ghazālī (al-Ghazālī 2005, 3:898). In al-Ghazālī’s version, it is the Chinese who polished their wall and won the competition. Rūmī, in his version, reversed the roles of the Chinese and the Rūm.

The genre of the ethics books combines the theoretical framework from Greek philosophy with the principles of Shariʿa, the *adab* literature, and some Sufi insights. Mystic influences are found in the books of predecessors of Kınālīzāde too. However, in these books, this influence is implicit. Kınālīzāde, on the other hand, not only frequently used Sufi poetry to support his advice but included the testament of Ghijduwānī, a prominent Naqshbandī *shaykh*, at the end of his book. Additionally, he narrates quite often stories in his *Akhlāq-i ʿAlāʾī* and he explicitly advises the reader to read further stories from books like Firdawsī’s *Shahnāma*.

Following Kınālīzāde's advice, the role of listening to stories crystalizes in developing an inner sense for finding the dynamically changing path of the middle way. Since the middle path is a very narrow path, it is almost impossible to follow it without deviation. The advice of Kınālīzāde is to keep variations within narrow limits at least and to avoid deviating too far from the middle path. The benefit of reading such stories or attending meetings where such stories are recited lies in the development of intuition, which enables a person to identify the right (or virtuous) path between two extremes with better precision. When a person acquires such knowledge (*ḥikma*), he can tread even closer to the middle path, and when he treads closer, his knowledge becomes even more accurate and his intuition more precise. This is how knowledge and practice interact in the field of ethics.

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Disability Rhetoric and Ethics in the Qur'ān's Narratives

A Literary Analysis of Speech and Hearing in Q 21:51–72 and Q 20:9–43

Halla Attallah

1 Introduction

The second/eighth-century theologian Wāṣil b. 'Aṭā' (d. 131/749) is celebrated by Muslim chroniclers for his morality and for having founded Mu'tazilism. He is also remembered for his long neck, lisp, and inability to pronounce the Arabic phoneme *r*—pronouncing it instead as *gh*. The sermons attributed to Wāṣil manage to completely eliminate the letter *rā'* in a way so masterful that audiences were purported to never have noticed. Whether historically accurate or the work of fiction, this anecdote is a brilliant example of how social expectations about one's ability—and especially what is considered “normal” for religious leaders—shape the discourse around them. Wāṣil's inability to pronounce *rā'* not only influenced *what* was written about him but also determined *how* his sermons were written. The linguistic ingenuity needed to accomplish a *ra'*-less homily indicates the power of normative assumptions over how different bodies and abilities are represented—whether by the individuals themselves or by their societies and societal texts. The sermons are not directly concerned with individuals with speech difficulties, yet ideas about orality pervade these texts. The meticulousness with which the sermons were crafted indicates the importance of fluency in spoken language for communicating religious knowledge. This, in turn, suggests the significance of hearing to receive this knowledge.

The centrality of speech and hearing for communicating religious knowledge can also be located within the Qur'ān. Both the Qur'ān's discourse and its role within Muslim practice privilege the ability to speak and hear. Within the Qur'ān's own discourse, this is suggested in several ways, including the process of divine revelation (*waḥy*), which is typically conceptualized as an oral phenomenon, entailing both the ability to speak and hear. Lauren Osborne argues that hearing in the Qur'ān is associated with its conceptualization of cognition. While God, for example, receives the appellation of “The Hearing (and) the Knowing (*al-Samī' al-ʿAlīm*),” the non-believers are characterized as either

refusing to hear (*lā yasma'ūn*), as deaf (*ṣumm*), or deafened by God, thereby unable to understand (*lā ya'qilūn*). Osborne notes that these associations are heightened by the Qur'ān's role as an oral scripture (Osborne 2020, 71–93). In the context of worship and when considering the art of the Qur'ān's recitation, Kristina Nelson's statement that the “Qur'ān is not the Qur'ān unless it is heard,” continues to resonate (Nelson 1985, xiv).

This raises questions about deafness and the inability to communicate through spoken language as a disability in the Qur'ān's historical worldview and its current practice. It also raises questions about how the received text (the *muṣḥaf*) continues to shape perspectives about different disabilities within contemporary Muslim communities. How, for example, does the Qur'ān use the terms “deaf (*ṣumm*)” or “mute (*bukm*)”¹ to bolster its theological arguments? Further, when considering this discourse from a contemporary literary perspective, what are the potential ethical implications on Deaf² Muslims or other individuals with communication differences, such as those who are neurodiverse? Finally, how do we engage aspects of the Qur'ān that challenge contemporary sensibilities regarding disability?

Scholars working on Islam and disability generally agree that the Qur'ān presents an inclusive position on physical differences. This likely influenced the perspective of later Muslim jurists concerned with people with disabilities or *ahl al-ʿāhāt* (Rispler-Chaim 2007; Ghaly 2016, 149–162). However, these conclusions are based on a straightforward reading of the Qur'ān's prescriptive content vis-à-vis the later Muslim interpretive traditions, and there is a gap in the scholarship examining disability as a complex literary trope in the text's narrative, figurative, and rhetorical dimensions. Indeed, while the two legal verses, typically cited by scholars, insist that there is “no moral blame (*ḥaraj*)” on “the blind (*a'mā*),” “the lame (*a'raj*),” or “the sick (*marīḍ*)” (Q 24:61, 48:17), the Qur'ān's figurative discourse regularly associates disability imagery with the idea of disbelief (*kufṛ*). The late Andrew Rippin, for example, notes the Qur'ān's metaphorical association of blindness with the inability to engage in religious truths. According to Rippin, this alerts us to some of the historical attitudes toward blindness, and it provokes moral concerns about blind

- 1 I will use the term “mute” when referring directly to the Qur'ānic depictions of the inability to speak as opposed to “dumb,” which is used by all English translations of the Qur'ān (that I am aware of). In general, however, I will try and refer to this disability more specifically as the inability to communicate through spoken language.
- 2 In this chapter, “deaf” with a lowercase “d” refers to individuals who cannot hear but use spoken language as their primary means of communicating, i.e., they are “culturally hearing.” “Deaf” with a capital “D” refers to groups who are profoundly deaf and for whom sign language is their first language.

individuals in the Qur'ān (Rippin 2008, 47–62). Rippin's remarks are especially relevant when considering deafness/muteness in the Qur'ān; unlike blindness, they are never represented favorably but are consistently associated with *kufṛ*. This, in turn, would be critiqued by most disability scholars and activists as *ableist*; it privileges the idea of non-disabled or hearing/speaking bodies.

This chapter offers a literary analysis of hearing/deafness and speaking/muteness in the Qur'ān's narrative content through the lens of disability studies. I examine the narrative function of speech and hearing vis-à-vis the idea of religious knowledge in the stories of Abraham and his community in Q 21:51–70 and Moses at the burning bush in Q 20:9–43. Arguing alongside Osborne, I demonstrate that the Qur'ānic narratives posit a correlation between the ability to speak/hear and the capacity to engage in religious knowledge. Abraham, for example, derides the idols on account of their inability to speak. As noted above, this emphasis on the importance of speech for the communication of religious knowledge also implies the significance of hearing. I argue further that the story of Moses destabilizes this network of association, stipulating that oral/aural communication is a requisite to religious engagement. In parallel with Wāṣil, Moses is remembered as an individual with a speech difference affecting his ability to communicate. In my reading, this story offers an ethical framework for both the full acceptance of individuals with communication differences and their accommodation. God, for example, does not “correct” or “untie (the) knot” in Moses’ “tongue,” as requested by His prophet (Q 20:26–27)—He accepts Moses just as he is.³ However, according to the Qur'ānic text, as we have it, God grants Moses Aaron (Hārūn), through whom Moses’ strengths come across. While this does not directly address the idea of deafness/muteness, it puts pressure on the assumption that the ability to speak or have fluency is a requisite for religious leadership. Conversely, it also implicitly undermines the idea that hearing is essential to religious learning.

2 Method and Approach

For this chapter, I utilize an approach that draws on both Qur'ānic and disability studies. Using an intratextual method, I examine what I refer to as the Qur'ān's disability imagery. This chapter, I should note, does not engage the Muslim exegetical and legal traditions, nor does it consider the development of

3 It is worth noting that some Classical Muslim exegetes understand this Qur'ānic text to indicate that God does indeed “cure” Moses’ speech difference.

the concept of disability within the broader history of Islam.⁴ I am interested in locating the concept of disability as it is presented by the Qur'ānic text *itself*. To achieve this, I rely on the methodological recommendations of Angelika Neuwirth, whose scholarship emphasizes the literary cohesion within the Qur'ānic chapters (the *sūras*) and who argues that the *sūra* should be taken as the Qur'ān's primary interpretive unit (Neuwirth 2019). Accordingly, I examine the stories of Abraham and Moses in Q 21 and 20 not as extensions of the biblical sources or as antecedents to the later Muslim renditions but as accounts integral to the discourses of the *sūras* in which they are embedded.⁵ I, for example, examine how these stories, along with their usage of (dis)ability language, help further the *sūras*' didactic goals.⁶ My reading also draws on synchronic approaches, such as those applied by Toshihiko Izutsu (2002). I consider Q 21:51–72 and 20:9–43, its key terms, and imagery alongside other Qur'ānic iterations of these stories,⁷ as well as other Qur'ānic texts relying on similar terms, locutions, or concepts. By reading vertically down the *sūra* and horizontally across the *muṣṣaf*, I seek to develop another strategy of reading the Qur'ānic stories and of understanding disability in the Qur'ān's discourse. Moreover, I take seriously the Qur'ān's literary categories, such as narration, dialogue, and characterization as a locus of meaning.

I bring this intratextual and narrative critical reading of the Qur'ānic stories into conversation with the theoretical frameworks used in disability studies. This includes Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's theory of the "normate"—an imagined body that is free of any stigmatizing or disabling traits—(1997) as well as David T. Mitchell's and Sharon D. Snyder's notion of "narrative prosthesis," which observes the dependence of discourses on disability (Mitchell and Snyder 2000). I adopt the principle that while disability is a contextually dependent phenomenon that shifts with each given society, it is a concept that is nonetheless ubiquitous; every culture—including its discourses and texts—has its own understanding of disability (Longmore and Umansky 2001,

4 For more information on the concept of disability in Muslim legal traditions, see Rispler-Chaim 2007 and Ghaly 2010, which includes disability in Muslim theology. For a historical examination of disability within a Muslim context, see Scalenghe 2014.

5 I should emphasize that I am not opposed to intertextual methods that read the Qur'ān alongside the biblical and/or Muslim traditions. However, I maintain that a Qur'ān-centered approach offers insights that may not be noticed otherwise.

6 This *sūra*-based approach is applied by some scholars interested in the concept of gender in the Qur'ān (see, for example, Ibrahim 2020).

7 The story of Abraham's dispute with his father and/or community is also presented/referenced by Q 6:74–84, 19:41–49, 26:69–93, 29:16–27, 37:83–101; and 43:26–27. The story of Moses' conversation with God at the burning bush is also iterated by Q 27:7–12, 28:29–34; and 79:15–19.

1–29). However, what physical/cognitive differences constitute a disability depends on the predominant values and societal structures that either facilitate or hinder one's ability to participate in valued institutions. Hence, the question is not whether the concept of disability exists in premodern texts, such as the Qur'ān, but how to locate this allusive category. One crucial strategy for uncovering disability is what can be referred to as the "stigma model." This approach maintains that the idea of disability is regularly invoked to marginalize practices and groups considered "deviant." Douglas Baynton, for example, observes this pattern in contemporary North American discourses, whereby disability language is used to signify who rightfully qualifies for citizenship and who should be excluded (Baynton 2001, 33–57). This pattern can also be located in premodern texts, as demonstrated by Saul Olyan's analysis of "icon polemics" in the Hebrew Bible (Olyan 2011, 89–102). In parallel with Olyan's findings, the Qur'ān also describes the idols using physical traits that were likely conceptualized as disabling; the idols are unable to see, speak, hear, benefit, or harm anyone. Yet, as argued by Jeremy Schipper, literary texts reflect a more complicated relationship with the concept of disability than what is suggested by the stigma model. In his analysis of Mephibosheth in the biblical David story, Schipper observes that disability—far from being a static concept—is a complex narrative device employed to illustrate a range of positions and ideologies (Schipper 2006). Similarly, the Qur'ān deploys disability language not only to stigmatize but also to describe individuals—as it does "the blind man (*a'mā*)" in Q 80—or even to elevate certain theological practices. In her examination of gender in Qur'ānic exegesis, Hadia Mubarak argues that the Qur'ān's multivalence contributed to the interpretive pluralism demonstrated by premodern exegetes regarding women (Mubarak 2021, 23–42). I suggest the same for disability, whereby we can locate a multiplicity of readings about disability in the Qur'ān.

3 The Idea of Disability in the Qur'ān

The Qur'ān, in parallel with other premodern texts, does not contain an all-encompassing term for disability, complicating this area of study (Rispler-Chaim 2007; 2016, 167–187; Scalenghe 2014; Ghaly 2016, 149–162). Kristina Richardson observes that the Qur'ān is rife with textual representations of impairments (Richardson 2012). This includes physical, cognitive, and sexual differences that are associated with male and/or female bodies. However, it does not follow that every physical difference mentioned by the Qur'ān, such as "blue eyes" (Q 20:102) or "barrenness (*uqm*)" (Q 3:40, 19:5, 8, 42:50, 51:29)

would have *necessarily* been considered a disability by its first/seventh-century audience, as some scholars suggest. Differences in physical and cognitive traits result in a disability only when they present a social consequence preventing them from participating in valued institutions.⁸ Vardit Rispler-Chaim's incisive analysis of disability in Islamic law suggests that the Qur'ānic term *marād* (sickness) can be understood as an all-encompassing term for disability. She notes the term's occurrence in the Qur'ān alongside other experiences considered barriers to religious participation, such as blindness and menstruation. She also observes that *marād* is employed by verses concerned with accommodating religious practices. Q 2:185, for example, states that those who are "ill (*marīḍ*) or on a journey" during Ramaḍān can make up their fast at a later point in time. Rispler-Chaim demonstrates that the Qur'ān's engagement with *marād* influenced the later works of Muslim jurists concerned with the idea of disability. This includes the *fiqh* chapters on *ṣalāt al-marīḍ* (the prayer of the sick), prescribing different ways of praying to accommodate different disabilities (Rispler-Chaim 2007; 2016, 167–187).

This chapter, however, will refrain from relying on the concept of *marād* for its understanding of Qur'ānic disability for two reasons specific to my own research goals. First, the maximalist scope denoted by *marād* runs the risk of diluting disability in the Qur'ān; it links blindness, for instance, with menstruation and travel, which (in my view) were unlikely conceived as disabilities. Second, sickness or disease indicates the preference for a cure, as in Q 26:80, where Abraham preaches to his community, "When I am sick, it is He (God) who cures me." My work is engaged with the question of representation and diversity, whereby disability is conceptualized as a political identity and not a condition to be "corrected," as suggested by the medical model.

The question of what precisely constitutes a disability in the Qur'ān is beyond the scope of this chapter, which is concerned with deafness/muteness and the ethics of the Qur'ān's language. I will, however, continue to use the term "disability imagery" as a shorthand for what was likely considered disabling by the Qur'ān. In parallel with the findings of biblical disability scholars, my analysis maintains that blindness, deafness, and muteness were conceptualized as disabilities by the Qur'ān's Late Antique audience. This triad fits the criteria suggested by disability theorists: they are regularly cited in conjunction, thereby suggesting a conceptual overlap between individuals exhibiting these characteristics (Raphael 2008, 13–15). Further, these traits are used in a complexity of ways, denoting the complicated relationship between various

8 In my view, there is still more work to be done on understanding the boundaries of disability in the Qur'ān.

(dis)abilities and the Qur'ān's community; they are invoked to marginalize "deviant" theological positions but also to help narrate valued practices. The same can be said about deafness/muteness, especially once we move beyond a team-based approach to consider the range of Qur'ānic representations that engage assumptions about speech and hearing.

It is worth noting that a literary examination of the Qur'ān does not provide definitive conclusions about disability within the first/seventh-century Arabian context. This is perhaps best determined by a multidisciplinary effort that includes historical and anthropological approaches. An intratextual literary analysis, however, allows us to theorize about the various (dis)abilities imagined by the early Qur'ānic community. Moreover, as the foundational Muslim scripture, we can assume that the Qur'ān, the *muṣḥaf*, continues to shape how disability is conceptualized by Muslim communities. Accordingly, I aim to think beyond an "institutional" or legal-centric Islam, which is concerned with pragmatic questions—such as disability vis-à-vis marriage (*munākaḥāt*), commerce (*mu'āmalāt*), or worship (*'ibādāt*)—to reflect on the underlying assumptions, attitudes, and anxieties about different bodies. Irrespective of the inclusive position of Muslim exegetes, many Muslims with disabilities are often excluded from central religious practices. Ingrid Mattson, for example, notes the exclusion of Deaf Muslims within North American mosques (Mattson 2012). This is also evidenced by Muslim writers and activists outside of academia concerned with the lack of accommodation in mosques for those with other disabilities in communication, such as autism (see, for example, the video PBS 2009, 8:32). Furthermore, based on my own experiences growing up between Medina and Jeddah, I recall the discomfort surrounding disability, and how this discomfort was often expressed using Qur'ānic imagery. Parents of disabled children, for example, are either accused (secretly) of having committed something that is *ḥarām* prior to parenthood—that is, their child's disability is a divine punishment—or assured that *because* of their disabled child, they are guaranteed a place in heaven, just as the prophet Ayūb was rewarded for his physical struggles. Hence, it is worth interrogating the overlaps (and disconnects) between the stories of the Qur'ān and the daily lived experiences or attitudes associated with disability. By tapping into the Qur'ān's stories and its multivalence on disability, we discover new ways of challenging the unquestioned assumptions underlying these exclusions and begin to discern a disability ethic that is based on the Muslim scripture.

3.1 *Abraham and the Idols in Q 21:51–70: Deafness/Muteness in the Qur'ān's Idol Polemics*

Sūrat al-Anbiyā' (The Prophets, Q 21) is a Meccan *sūra* believed to have been revealed when the Prophet Muḥammad and his followers were persecuted and

rejected by the Meccan tribes. The text as we have it consists of 112 verses, which can be organized into a tripartite structure (Neuwirth 1981); the introductory section alludes to the immediate situation of its “proclaimer” (Q 21:1–47), the middle section presents the stories of the former prophets (Q 2:48–91), and the concluding verses circling back to its present scenario (Q 21:92–112). One of the main narrative threads bridging the three segments is the motif of a prophet who is rejected and ridiculed by a community, who like “their fathers,” continue to worship gods “instead of” the One God (Q 21:24, 29, 43, 66, 67 and 98). Members of the Qur’ān’s immediate community, for example, are portrayed as dismissing the revelations as a “false dream” and as reproachful of the Prophet, accusing him of “fabricating it” or of being “a poet” (Q 21:4–5). This antagonism is brought to life by the *sūra*’s second segment recounting the stories of the former prophets and figures, such as Moses, Abraham, Lot, Zachariah, and Mary—all of whom also struggled with their communities.

The scenario associated with Abraham in Q 21:51–72 is the longest and most comprehensive story presented by the *sūra*. While the story of Moses, for example, is only referenced in three verses as a “blessed reminder” (50), the story of Abraham is allotted more narrative details, such as dialogue and actions by its characters. The excerpt also closely parallels the themes and tensions characterizing the discourse of the first and last segments of the *sūra* concerned with the Qur’ān’s immediate religious context. Like the Qur’ān’s “proclaimer,” the Prophet Muḥammad, Abraham argues for monotheism but is questioned, ridiculed, and rejected. Verses 51–70 read as follows:

And verily We bestowed upon Abraham his sound judgment from before, and of him, We were well-acquainted (51). When he said to his father and his community, “What are these images to which you are so devoted?” (52). They said, “We found our fathers worshipping them” (53). He said, “Indeed, you and your fathers have been in manifest error” (54). They said, “Have you come to us with the truth, or are you one of those who jest?” (55). He said, “No, (but rather) your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, the One Who created them, and I am one of those who bear witness to this (truth)” (56). “And by God, I will surely plot against your idols after you leave, turning (your) backs” (57). He then reduced them into pieces except for the large one among them so that they may return to it (58). They said, “Who did this to our gods? Indeed, he is one of the wrongdoers” (59). They said, “We heard a young man mentioning them. He is called Abraham” (60). They said, “Then bring him before the eyes of the people so that they (too) may bear witness” (61). They said, “Did you do this to our gods, O Abraham?” (62). He said, “Nay, the largest of them did this, so ask them if they were able to speak” (63). So, they returned to

themselves, and they said, “Indeed, you are the ones who are the wrong-doers” (64). They then turned on their heads (saying), “Verily you know that these do not speak” (65). He said, “Do you then worship, instead of God, that which does not benefit you in any way nor harm you? (66). Fie upon you and upon what you worship instead of God. Do you not understand?” (67). They said, “Burn him and save your gods if you were of the doers” (68). We said, “O fire be cool and peaceful for Abraham” (69). And they wanted to plot against him, so We made them into the greatest failures (70). We delivered him and Lot to the land which We blessed for all the worlds (71), And we blessed him with Isaac and Jacob, in addition, and well made all of them righteous (72).

Q 21:51–72

The passage resembles the other Qur’ānic iterations of this story in terms of sequence, content, and certain locutions.⁹ All the scenarios, for example, begin with the phrase, “When Abraham said to his father and/or community,” which is typically followed by a rhetorical question criticizing the practice of idolatry. In the above text, Abraham asks, “What are these images to which you are so devoted?” (Q 21:52) Through dramatic dialogue, the text then presents a prolonged dispute between Abraham and his community juxtaposing the idols with God. The community does not negate Abraham’s accusation that they worship “images”; they justify this practice by claiming that they are simply abiding by the traditions of their fathers (Q 21:53), thereby mirroring the discourse at the beginning of this *sūra* (Q 21:44). After Abraham condemns them and their fathers of being in “manifest error” (Q 21:54), the community challenges him by asking, “Have you come to us with the truth (*ḥaqq*) or are you one of those who jest (*l-‘b*)?” (Q 21:55)—a dichotomy that is also suggested by the *sūra*’s first segment characterizing the nonbelievers as listening to the Qur’ān’s truth while “at play (*l-‘b*)” (Q 21:2). Abraham responds to their reproachful question by voicing a Qur’ānic truth affirming God as the “Lord of the heavens and the earth.” He then defends the veracity of this knowledge by positioning himself as the one among them who “bears witness” (Q 21:56).

In Q 21:57, Abraham declares—likely to himself—that he will “plot against” the idols once the community has left and their backs have been turned. Breaking from the dramatic dialogue characterizing the passage, the text informs us that Abraham “reduced them (the idols) into pieces,” leaving the largest of them so that “they (the community) may return to it” or see it (Q 21:58). After

9 For more on the parallels between the Qur’ānic stories of Abraham and the idols, consider Attallah and Archer 2021, 80–88.

the community asks Abraham if he is the one responsible for the destruction (Q 21:62), he says—in what can be interpreted as mocking in tone—that “it was the largest of them” who is guilty and that they should “ask them (the idols), if they were able to speak” (Q 21:63). This leads the community to dispute among themselves, whereby some accuse the others of wrongdoing, affirming that indeed, “these (idols) do not speak” (Q 21:64–65). The lack of divine power based on the inability to speak is presented as a clear and rational fact—even to Abraham’s nonbelieving community. Abraham then interjects by saying, “Do you then worship instead of God, that which does not benefit you in any way nor harm you? Fie upon you and upon what you worship instead of God” (Q 21:66–67). Abraham’s final words, like his first statement, begin with a rhetorical question condemning the practice of idolatry. However, instead of referring to the idols as “images,” he elaborates upon their “deficiencies”; the idols cannot benefit or harm. Abraham’s closing statement also reiterates the *sūra*’s overarching concern regarding those who take “gods instead of God.”¹⁰ The community then conspires to burn Abraham, but their plan is foiled by God, who cools the fire (Q 21:68–69). The passage then concludes, like the other Qur’ānic iterations of this narrative, by informing us that God “blessed (Abraham) with Isaac and Jacob” (Q 21:72). Abraham is granted descendants to replace the loss of a community or lineage. The text also emphasizes that Isaac and Jacob were “righteous,” unlike Abraham’s community, who were made into the “greatest failures” (Q 21:70).

In its construction of the idols and their worshippers, the scenario draws on (dis)ability imagery both directly and implicitly. While Abraham and God are associated with the concept of a non-disabled body,¹¹ the idols, and their worshippers are linked to a range of disabilities. The most salient impairments utilized by the excerpt are blindness, deafness, and muteness. Read alongside the parallel scenario from Q 19, for example, the opening rhetorical question, accusing the community of worshipping “images,” can also be understood as “why do you worship that which does not hear and does not see and does not benefit you in any way.” Even in the absence of direct terms, such as blindness/deafness, we can infer that the idols are likened to those who are blind and deaf. The relationship between seeing/blindness and religious knowledge is also suggested by the term “to bear witness (*shāhidīn*),” which this chapter

10 This idea is repeated six times in Q 21:24, 29, 43, 66, 69, and 98.

11 Abraham, for example, claims to be one of those who “bear witness,” which this chapter assumes to be a metaphor based on concepts about sight. This is supported by the parallel scenario in Q 6:74–84, where Abraham visually contemplates the contents of the heavens before realizing that he is a “monotheist (*hanīf*).”

understands as a metaphor based on ideas about seeing. This is supported by the community's reaction to finding their idols "in pieces"; they demand the culprit be brought "before the eyes of the people so that they (too) can bear witness." The passage then focuses on the idols' inability to speak, thereby indicating the importance of spoken language for the communication of religious knowledge and the significance of hearing for the reception of this knowledge. The excerpt also alludes to characteristics commonly deployed in contemporary disability stereotypes, such as the inability to benefit or harm anyone. The idols, like bodies that are imagined as disabled, are presented as vulnerable, unable to defend themselves—let alone the community—or contribute to society in any meaningful way.

Disability imagery is not limited to technical terms; "blindness," "deafness," and "muteness" are expressed through a range of representations that actively engage assumptions about these disabilities. Rippin's essay on metaphors of blindness emphasizes that blindness in the Qur'ān is not only symbolized by terms such as "blind (*'m-y*)" or references to the physical eye (*'ayn*). The Qur'ān alludes to the idea of blindness via other concepts, such as darkness (Rippin 2008, 47–62). Q 2:17, for example, equates those who feign their faith in public to those surrounded by the light of a kindled fire but whose light is taken away by God, leaving them "in darkness unable to see." Similarly, deafness and the inability to speak are conveyed by the Qur'ān in a variety of ways, as it is in the story of Abraham and the idols.

3.2 *Speech and Hearing in the Qur'ān's Idol Polemics*

The significance of oral communication about religious knowledge is dramatized by the story of Abraham and the idols. Abraham plots to destroy the idols not only to demonstrate their helplessness or their inability to "benefit or harm" but also to stage their inability to speak. After the community discovers their idols "in pieces," they ask Abraham if he is the one responsible. He replies, "Nay, the largest of them did this, so ask them if they were *able* to speak" (*italics added*). Abraham's people then turn toward one another, some "(saying), verily you know that these do not speak"; the idols' muteness is already recognized by them. The lack of divinity based on the inability to speak is presented as a well-established fact known to Abraham, his community, and, more importantly, to the Qur'ān's immediate audience, whom the text is attempting to persuade theologically. The text does not directly use the term "mute (*bukm*)," and yet this concept is a central part of the story of Abraham and his people.

Reading the stories of Abraham for the concept of disability indicates that the inability to speak was assumed to be the most "disabling" physical trait, barring one from divine participation. The scenario in Q 37, for example, emphasizes the idols' inability to speak and eat. After the community departs,

Abraham “moved toward their gods and said, ‘do you not eat? Why do you not speak?’” (Q 37:91–92). The lack of response propels Abraham into action, “striking them (the idols) with the right (hand).” The inability (or unwillingness) to eat is also invoked by the annunciation story in Q 51. Abraham serves his guests a “fatted calf” (Q 51:26) and then asks, “Do you not eat?” The visitors’ refusal to eat, however, inspires a different reaction, Abraham recoils in fear. Unlike the idols, Abraham’s visitors can speak to communicate divine messages.

The significance of oral communication is also suggested by the Qur’ān’s broader discourse. This includes the concept of *waḥy*, which was largely understood as an oral phenomenon. Whereas the idols cannot speak, God communicates through the process of *waḥy*—which is imagined as something that is heard. Prophets communicate this *waḥy* through speech to a presumably hearing community. This is indicated by Qur’ānic verses employing the formula beginning with the singular imperative “say” or “*qul*,” followed by the message that is to be transmitted.¹² The importance of spoken religious knowledge is also suggested by the Qur’ānic term “recite (*utlu*).” Q 18:27, for example, commands its proclaimer to “recite (*utlu*) what was revealed (*ūḥiya*) to you of the book of your Lord.”

Bodies that are imagined as unable to speak are invoked more directly by the Qur’ānic term “*bukm*.” This term is regularly cited alongside deafness and blindness, as in Q 2:18 and 171, to indicate the extent to which a group of people cannot perceive religious knowledge.¹³ “*Bukm*” is also employed on its own to illustrate the idea of one’s “uselessness” where religious matters are concerned. The parable of the two men in Q 16:76, for example, states that “One of them is mute (*abkam*) not capable of anything and he is a burden on his master, and wherever he directs him, he is no good.” This is followed by the rhetorical question: “Can he (the mute individual) be equal to the one who commands justice and who is on the straight path?” The text draws on imagery related to both class (master/slave) and disability (muteness/commanding with justice) to bring into relief the Qur’ān’s concept of monotheism. Hence, the ability to access and wield spoken language is related to ideas about both power and knowledge.

12 The *qul* formulas can be found 332 times within the Qur’ān (pace ‘Abd al-Bāqī’s (2001) index of the Qur’ān). For more information on the use of the introductory *qul* formulas in the Qur’ān, consult Stewart 2011, 323–348.

13 Q 2:18 reads, “Deaf, mute and blind for they will not return.” Q 2:171 begins using the same locution but concludes by saying, “for they do not understand.” Also see Q 6:39, “And the ones who denied our signs (are) deaf (and) mute in the darkness.” Although the verse does not use the word “blind,” it is still alluded to through the concept of darkness, which is used in literature to indicate the inability to see. Also see Q 17:97, “And We gather them on the Day of Judgment on their faces, blind, mute and deaf.”

The Qur'ān's discourse on "muteness" suggests that speech and hearing were likely conceptualized as interrelated phenomena; both are portrayed as faculties necessary for acquiring religious knowledge. The term "*bukm*" is most often cited alongside "deaf (*ṣumm*)"—possibly because deafness and the inability to speak were imagined as coexisting disabilities. This conceptual interdependence is implied, even when these terms are not used together. Abraham's story from Q 21, for example, does not directly employ the trope of hearing/deafness; however, the importance of *hearing* religious information is suggested by the text's emphasis on the significance of speech. Further, deafness is directly associated with the idols in the other iterations of this scenario. In Q 19:42, for instance, Abraham asks his father, "Why do you worship that which does not hear?" Similarly, in Q 26:72, Abraham asks his community whether the idols "hear you when you call upon them?" Speech and hearing, therefore, seem to be conceptualized as interrelated disabilities. Moreover, both are posited as a requisite to religious engagement.

3.3 *Muteness and Deafness in the Qur'ān: What Can We Make of This Reading?*

Q 21:51–72 appears to reflect the Qur'ān's broader discourse about deafness and muteness, even though the text does not directly use the terms "mute (*bukm*)" or "deaf (*ṣumm*).¹ The text posits the significance of communicating religious knowledge through speech—as it does for the idols—and, by extension, the importance of hearing to receive this knowledge. Like the sermons attributed to Wāṣil, ideas about speech and hearing are embedded in the text. From this, we can infer that during the time of the revelations, deaf individuals and/or those believed unable to communicate through spoken language were assumed to be on the margins of society, unable to partake in essential sociopolitical institutions, such as the Qur'ān's orality. This, of course, does not give us definitive conclusions about the real lived experiences of deaf individuals within the first/seventh-century Arabian context. Nor is it indicative of the spiritual status of such groups in the Qur'ān, which emphasizes obedience to God and His messengers, and not one's body. However, given the consistent association between deafness/muteness with the idea of disbelief (*kufṛ*)—unlike blindness, which is at times portrayed sympathetically by the Qur'ān—it is reasonable to assume that the inability to hear and/or communicate through speech was considered particularly "disabling." Accordingly, the concept of deafness/muteness serves as a powerful rhetorical device for the construction of otherness in the Qur'ān: the idols and those who reject the Qur'ān's message.

Regardless of the question of historicity, such literary patterns raise concerns about how the received text continues to shape assumptions and anxieties about disabilities, such as deafness. The consistent association between

deafness/muteness and disbelief is ethically challenging—especially when considering the predominantly oral approach to the Qur'ān in Muslim practice. Mattson argues for the reconsideration of certain Qur'ānic terms in English translations of the Qur'ān, such as “*bukm*,” which is consistently translated using the problematic term “dumb.” She also reminds us that this solution is not possible for the Arabic text, which—as the words of God—cannot be altered. Hence, this requires an exegetical move that delves into the Qur'ān's own multivalence as it relates to deafness/muteness. In the following section, I consider the story of Moses at the burning bush from *sūrat Ṭāhā* (Q 20), which highlights the prophet's speech difficulty.

3.4 “Untying the Knot”: Disability and the Story of Moses in *Sūrat Ṭāhā* (Q 20:9–43)

Sūrat Ṭāhā (Q 20) is a Meccan *sūra* consisting of 135 verses. The *sūra* references three scenarios associated with the Prophet Muḥammad, Moses, and Adam. In my reading, these stories are connected rhetorically via the themes of monotheism and distress. They all emphasize God's uniqueness, omnipresence, and unrivaled power. The three scenarios also address the theme of personal suffering when attempting to engage this monotheistic knowledge as well as God's desire to ease this hardship. This is indicated by the opening verses addressed directly to the Prophet Muḥammad. Verses 1–8 read:

Ṭā-Hā (1). We did not reveal the Qur'ān to you that you are distressed (*li-tashqā*) (2). (It is) but a reminder (*tadhkiratan*) for those who fear (God) (3). A revelation from the One Who created the earth and the high heavens (4). The Most Compassionate, on the established throne (5). To Him (belongs) what is in the heavens and what is on the earth and all that is between them and what is under the soil (6). And if you speak aloud, He knows the secret and what is (yet) more hidden (7). God, there is no god except Him. To Him (belongs) the best of names (8).

Q 20:1–8

The *sūra* opens with the mysterious letters *ṭā-hā* followed by the invocation of a holy scripture, the Qur'ān. The text then immediately suggests the presence of distress on the part of the Qur'ān's proclaimer, who is rejected by some of his people. Like Q 21, the *sūra* highlights the tensions between the prophets and their communities and/or situations. Unlike Q 21, however, Q 20 also focuses on the internal struggles of the prophets as they grapple with their religious obligations. The above text, for example, claims that “We did not reveal the Qur'ān to you that you be distressed (*li-tashqā*)” (Q 20:2). Attending to the struggles and possibly despair of its proclaimer, the Qur'ān assures him that

the revelations are simply a “reminder” for “those who fear God” (Q 20:3) or those willing to receive the message. The idea of personal struggle is also central to the story of Moses, who is distressed by the command to go to Pharaoh and, more specifically, by the “knot (*‘uqda*)” in his “tongue (*lisān*).”

The above excerpt continues by narrating a series of Qur’ānic truths, defining God’s unique creative ability, compassion, majestic power, omnipresence, and infinite knowledge, both of what is said aloud and what is concealed or not spoken (Q 20:5–7). This series of theological proclamations concludes with the central monotheistic locution, “There is no God but Him (*lā ilāha illā huwa*)” (Q 20:8), before transitioning to the story of Moses, which further develops the themes of monotheism and distress.

At 90 verses, the section dedicated to Moses is the longest and most comprehensive story in Q 20. It can be further divided into three subsections: the story of Moses at the burning bush, his and Aaron’s confrontation with Pharaoh, and the Qur’ān’s exodus story. The text also references Moses’ life and struggles prior to his encounter with God, highlighting his infancy and especially the experiences of his mother. The story of Moses begins with the scene at the burning bush. Verses 9–14 read:

Has the story of Moses reached you? (9). When he perceived a fire and said to his people, “Wait here, for I have indeed perceived a fire. Perhaps I can bring you a torch, or I might find upon the fire guidance” (10). And when he approached it, he was called, “O Moses (11). Indeed, I am your Lord. And remove your sandals. Indeed, you are in the sacred valley of Ṭuwā (12). I have chosen you, so listen to what is revealed. Indeed, it is I who is God. There is no god except Me. So, worship Me and establish the prayer to remember Me” (14).

Q 20:9–14

The excerpt begins by maintaining the second-person discourse used by the opening verses. After informing the Prophet not to distress, the *sūra* segues into another topic by asking, “Has the story of Moses reached you?” (Q 20:9). The narration then transitions to the third person as it begins recounting this story; Moses perceives a fire and informs his people (or family) that he will investigate it, lest he finds a torch or guidance (Q 20:10). Once at the burning bush, God addresses Moses directly, and the text continues by presenting an extensive and intimate dialogue between God and Moses. God calls on Moses directly (Q 20:11), informing him, “Indeed, I am your Lord” (Q 20:12). He then asks Moses to remove his sandals in this sacred space (Q 20:12) before telling him, “I have chosen you,” and instructing Moses to “listen to what is revealed” (Q 20:13). God proceeds by repeating the theological declaration cited at the

beginning of the *sūra*: “There is no God but Him (*huwa*)” (Q 20:8). In conversation with Moses, however, God references himself in the first-person singular, saying, “There is no god except *Me (ana)*” (Q 20:14, italics added). This suggests intimacy and directness that is distinct from the second-person discourse at the beginning of the *sūra*.

The familiar tone characterizing this dialogue continues through the passage, demonstrated by exchanges such as the one about Moses' staff. After warning Moses about “the Hour” (Q 20:15), God asks his prophet, “And what is that in your right hand, O Moses?” (Q 20:17). The question appears as though it were an afterthought or an interjection to the topic at hand (God's uniqueness and the Day of Recompense) in a style that we might attribute to a casual conversation. Moses mirrors this informality by saying, “This is my staff. I lean on it and beat down (branches) with it for my sheep. And I have other uses for it” (Q 20:18). Instead of simply answering God's question—“This is my staff,” which alone would have sufficed—Moses adds conversational details; it is a staff for leaning on, helping sheep move along, and for much more. God then demonstrates to Moses the “great signs (*āyāt*)” by temporarily turning his staff into a snake and changing Moses' hand color to white (Q 20:17–23).

Once God establishes these signs, He commands Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, for he has truly transgressed” (Q 20:24). Moses replies as follows:

My Lord expand for me my chest (25), and ease for me my task (26), and untie the knot from my tongue (27) that they may understand my speech (28), and appoint for me a minister from my family (29), Aaron, my brother (30).

Q 20:25–30

This text, which can be read as a supplication, echoes the theme of distress from the beginning of the *sūra*. Moses' anxiety, however, stems from a fear of rejection and the concern that his speech will not be understood. Upon receiving the divine command that he must go to Pharaoh—to confront him through spoken language—Moses asks God to expand his chest and make this daunting task easier by untying or detangling the knot in his tongue, so that they would understand his speech (Q 20:25–27). Moses then claims that his strength and devotion to God would be increased through his brother Aaron (Q 20:31–32). In my reading, this supplication represents Moses' “coming out” as an individual with a disability. Moses identifies his disability and asks for an accommodation in the form of his brother Aaron.

Following this line of thought, we can interpret God's response to Moses' concerns as an affirmation of his disability. God acknowledges and accepts Moses' disability. He tells Moses that his request has already been granted, reminding

him of the times when He had eased his suffering before (Q 20:36–37). He relates the story of Moses' infancy, emphasizing the dramatic separation and comforting reunion with his mother through the physical connection of breastfeeding, which reduces his mother's sadness (Q 20:38–40). God also reminds Moses of how he had been delivered from the distress of having killed a man and of his time in Madyan (Q 20:40). In Q 20:41, God concludes this brief biography by telling Moses: "I have produced you for Myself," indicating that Moses is perfect in the eyes of God just as he is—tangled tongue and all. While some Muslim exegetes understand God's response as an indication that Moses' tongue is ultimately "untangled" by God, my Qur'ān-centered analysis does not. The textual exclusion of Moses' "tangled tongue" from God's speech in the Qur'ān creates an ambiguity, thereby inviting other readings—especially when we consider God's other important interventions that are explicitly invoked. While it is clear, for example, that God provides Aaron, just as he had reunited Moses with his mother, it remains textually ambiguous whether He "cures" Moses' speech difference.

From a disability studies lens, we can draw on two aspects of this extended dialogue: first, Moses' "knotted" tongue—whether we read it as a literal or figurative difference—is an integral part of his complex identity and prophetic experience. As Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper observed regarding Moses in the Book of Exodus, Moses' speech difficulty is identified by Moses himself (Junior and Schipper 2008, 428–441). This also appears to be the case for Moses in the Qur'ān, who cites this difficulty in other passages, such as Q 26:13 and 28:34. Second, God does not "correct" or "fix" Moses' tongue, as Moses requests. However, he agrees to grant him Aaron, who serves as a "co-prophet" and (in my reading) as his interpreter. In her analysis of Moses in the Hebrew Bible, Rhiannon Graybill notes that God "acknowledges Moses' assessment of his powers of speech as valid. Instead of refuting or dismissing Moses' complaint, he provides Moses with a solution: a prosthetic mouth in the form of his brother Aaron" (Graybill 2016, 29). Drawing on Graybill's scholarship, we could similarly conclude that the Qur'ān presents Moses' speech difficulty as one that is accommodated by God through Aaron, not changed.

3.5 *Moses' Speech: Disability as a Social Identity*

Moses' "tangled" tongue, regardless of how we interpret this ambiguous Qur'ānic description—whether it is figurative, symbolic of Moses' ineloquence in a particular dialect, or an actual physical affliction—is a difficulty that is identified by Moses himself and by others in the Qur'ān. Further, it is a difficulty that poses a social challenge to the prophet in a way that is reminiscent of the experience of individuals with a disability. Moses expresses this

concern in the parallel scenario referenced in *sūrat al-Shu'arā'* (Q 26:10–13). After God commissions Moses to go to the community of wrongdoers in verse 10, he responds once again by referencing his communication difficulty and the social dimension of this difference. Moses tells God that he fears that he will be rejected (Q 26:12), that his chest will tighten, and that his tongue will not be able to produce or express his message (Q 26:13). Moses' speech is also mentioned and ridiculed by the Pharaoh in *sūrat al-Zukhruf* (The Ornaments). He describes Moses as “insignificant and hardly understood” (Q 43:51–52).

Moses' struggle to produce meaning or to adequately convey God's message to Pharaoh is symbolized by a “defective” tongue. Furthermore, both scenarios, from Q 20 and 26, use the term “*ṣadr*” (breast or chest), a Qur'ānic concept that is associated with a wide range of meanings pertaining to a religious experience. In this textual context, it is conceptually related to the idea of suffering, indicated by the physical sensation of a tightening in the chest and of relief, symbolized by an expansion of the chest by God, thereby alleviating this constriction. The most prominent Qur'ānic example invoking this imagery is from *sūrat al-Sharḥ* (The Relief, Q 94). Verses 1–2, addressing the Prophet, state: “Did We not expand for you your chest? And We removed from you your burden.” Moses' burden stems (in part) from his speech, and the anxiety he expresses is reminiscent of the alienation experienced by individuals with disabilities related to communication.

Sūrat Ṭāhā expresses a strong interest in the notion of human suffering and God's desire to mitigate this distress—especially where religious participation is concerned. As noted above, this is suggested by the opening verses addressed to the Prophet Muḥammad and by the passage dedicated to Adam. God warns Adam that if he obeys Iblīs, he will be exiled from Paradise and suffer as a result (Q 20:115–123). In the account related to Moses, God's desire to ease emotional pain is also extended to Moses' mother. The verses valorize both the emotional and physical distress of a mother's forced separation from her infant, which is finally eased through a reunion and the physical act of breastfeeding. God informs Moses, “We returned you to your mother so that *she* would be comforted and not saddened” (Q 20:40, italics added).

The idea that God wishes to reduce suffering—emotional or physical—is not limited to the prophets of the Qur'ān but is also extended to all people in general. As noted in the introduction, Rispler-Chaim's analysis of the Qur'ānic term “sickness (*marad*)” indicates the notion of accommodation. Q 2:185, for example, states that during Ramaḍān, those who are ill or on a journey can make up their fast at a later point in time because “God intends for you ease and does not desire for you hardship.” Hence, religious participation, duties, and rituals need not be a burden—physical, social, or emotional.

3.6 *The Prophet Aaron (Hārūn): A Qur'ānic Case for Accommodation*

From a disability studies perspective, it is noteworthy that according to the text, as we have it, God does not alleviate Moses' distress by "untying" the knot in his tongue as Moses requests—even though God is considered omnipotent and, therefore, capable of doing so with ease. The verses indicate that God prefers Moses just as he is—speech difficulty and all. God informs Moses that he is chosen and given love (Q 20:13, Q 20:39). In Q 20:41, God tells Moses, "I took you for Myself"—a phrase that not only highlights God's full acceptance of Moses' difference but also the intimacy of the dialogue between the two as compared to other Qur'ānic prophets.

Instead of untying the knot in Moses' tongue, God grants him his brother, the prophet Aaron, who functions as a translator or interpreter, as suggested by Graybill regarding the biblical Moses. This partnership is reflected by the language of the text as the story moves forward with the addition of Aaron. God, for example, repeats the same command he gives to Moses in verse 24; however, in verse 43, it is in the dual form, addressing both prophets. Prior to the inclusion of Aaron, God commands Moses in the singular, saying, "Go (*idhhab*) to Pharaoh for indeed he has transgressed" (Q 20:24). In Q 20:43, God repeats this command, saying, "Go both of you (*idhhabā*) to Pharaoh, indeed, he has transgressed."

The Qur'ān also suggests that Aaron is a blessing to Moses—an idea that is indicated by the trilateral root *w-h-b*, typically translated as "to bestow" or "to give." Q 19:53 states, "We gave (*wahabnā*) to him out of our Mercy his brother, Aaron." Just as God grants (*wahaba*) Abraham Isaac and Jacob because of his physical inability to reproduce (Q 6:84, 19:49, 21:72, and 29:27), God blesses Moses with Aaron because of his difficulty communicating. Hence, from the Qur'ānic story of Moses, we can begin to derive an ethical framework for disability. If we imagine Moses as an individual with a communication disability, we find that the Qur'ān presents a position that is not only fully accepting of this disability but also one that is cognizant of the social consequences that it can present. Moreover, it offers an ethic for accommodating rather than "fixing" individuals with a disability.

4 Reading for Deafness and the Inability to Speak in the Story of Moses: Concluding Thoughts

Returning to the issue posed by the story of Abraham and the idols, which suggests that speech and, therefore, its counterpart hearing is a requisite for religious participation, the narrative attributed to Moses problematizes a

definitive association between speech and privileged Qur'ānic categories such as prophethood. While the story of Moses is not directly concerned with deafness or those completely unable to communicate through spoken language, as indicated by the Qur'ānic word "*bukm*," it nevertheless presents us with an alternative model that destabilizes the connection between disabilities, such as deafness, with the idea of disbelief or the inability to acquire religious knowledge. Moses' speech difficulty does not preclude him from becoming one of the Qur'ān's most significant prophets but is instead an integral part of his identity and story. Further, it is noteworthy that Moses, the prophet who struggles to communicate with the society around him, is the only Qur'ānic prophet with whom God speaks directly, and in the first-person singular. Q 4:164, for example, informs us that "God spoke to Moses with direct speech (*kallama Llāhu Mūsā taklīmā*)." Moreover, as emphasized above, there is an intimacy that can be discerned from the dialogue between God and Moses. Unlike the second-person discourse at the beginning of the *sūra* with the Prophet Muḥammad, God talks to Moses in the first-person singular, demonstrating a more personal and familiar exchange.

There are several ways to interpret this uniquely close relationship between God and Moses in the Qur'ān. From an interreligious perspective, for example, we can infer that the story of Moses functions as a subtle commentary addressing the Qur'ān's surrounding Jewish communities. Neuwirth, for instance, writes that the story of Moses and his people (*Banū Isrā'īl*) is theoretically "the site of remembrance of an incident of failed communication that was felt as humiliating" (Neuwirth 2019, 414). In this case, the Qur'ān's depiction of this intimate exchange is a direct critique of a community believed to have neglected God's direct communication to them.

I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation to this exclusive treatment of Moses. Given the consistent association between deafness/muteness and moral depravity in the Qur'ān's figurative dimension—and the exclusion of Deaf Muslims from certain religious practices, such as the orality of the Qur'ān—the story of Moses offers another avenue for thinking about communication disabilities. On the one hand, the Qur'ān's discourse seems to marginalize individuals with disabilities in speech and hearing, as indicated by the story of Abraham. On the other hand, the Qur'ānic story of Moses deemphasizes this assessment by presenting a scenario whereby fluency in speech—and conversely, the ability to *hear* speech—is not a requirement for religious participation and inclusion. This notion is further supported by other parts of the Qur'ān, and especially the Qur'ān's stories. One example (depending on one's reading) that perhaps destabilizes the connection between religious belonging and speech/hearing is the story of Zachariah, who is commanded by

God to not speak for three nights and instead communicates through gestures (Q 19:10–11).

In conclusion, I propose that the story of Moses also offers a path for rethinking the orality of the Qurʾān within Muslim practice, which, as noted in the introduction, excludes certain groups of people. Based on this reading, we can infer that just as God accommodates Moses' disability, Muslim communities, and mosques have an ethical obligation to embrace and accommodate all people. This includes those who are culturally Deaf—by providing translators, as recommended by Mattson—or those who are neurodiverse, such as individuals with autism, who may struggle with some of the rituals associated with Muslim practices. The Qurʾānic story of Moses illustrates the Qurʾān's multivalence on the idea of speech or the ability to communicate through spoken language and by extension, the ability to hear. It allows us to explore the various exegetical threads inherent within the Qurʾān without altering the Qurʾānic text.

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The Narrativisation of Qur'ānic Verses and the Formation of Ethics

Prefatory Traditions in Ottoman Calligraphy

Bilal Badat

1 Introduction

The study of prefatory traditions in Ottoman calligraphy is not of purely art historical interest. In seeking to confer legitimacy on scribal activity, Ottoman authors formulated discourses through the framework of scriptural exegesis, engaging in hermeneutical discussions that have a direct bearing on the subjects of creation, cosmogony, and the ethics of knowledge, three of the most important questions encountered in Islamic theology. This chapter seeks to do justice to the theological and ethical reasonings formulated in Ottoman prefaces and introductory overtures to texts on Ottoman calligraphy—a category that includes Ottoman treatises on calligraphy and biographical dictionaries of calligraphers—through a guided study of the use of narratives in the formation of ethics. As argued here, Ottoman authors established the ethical principles of calligraphy through hermeneutical readings of specific Qur'ānic verses. Such verses were taken as proof of the sanctity of the scribal arts and further transposed into poetic and literary narratives to provide a sense of meaning and moral orientation for the study of calligraphy.

In seeking to fully contextualize the content and scope of this study, this chapter begins with a definition of terms, clarifying what is understood by the category of “Ottoman calligraphy” and how this definition relates to its practitioners.

2 Ottoman Calligraphy and Ottoman Calligraphers

Throughout Islamic history, the Qur'ān has inspired a rich array of artistic expressions spanning various social, religious, and political contexts (James 1988; Bayani, Contadini, and Stanley 1999; Lings 2004; Baker 2007; Derman 2010; Berk 2010). These diverse artistic interpretations converged into a triumvirate of calligraphy, illumination, and bookbinding, evolving over time and

space to engender works of remarkable beauty and significance (Haldane 1983; Özen 1998; 2003; Özcan 2009). Among these, calligraphy held a paramount position within Ottoman society, transcending other artistic traditions in the aesthetic, epistemological, and spiritual realms of craft (Mustafa 'Âlî 2011, 162–163; Hâfizzâde 2014, 85).

The earliest Ottoman master calligraphers followed the style of calligraphy developed by the late 'Abbâsid calligrapher, Yâqût al-Musta'şimî (d. 698/1298) (Derman 1999, 6, 15). However, by the late ninth/fifteenth century, the exceptionally gifted calligraphers Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 926/1520) and Ahmed Karahisârî (d. 963/1556) forged distinctive calligraphic styles, heralding the inception of what is now commonly known as the earliest "Ottoman" styles (James 1992, 194–211; Derman 1999, 5–6; Blair 2006, 238–315). These styles were then passed down from master to apprentice through the traditional Ottoman apprenticeship system, thus ensuring their continuity across subsequent generations of calligraphers.

Of the early Ottoman styles, the style of writing inaugurated by the court calligrapher Şeyh Hamdullah by far exceeded those of his rivals in popularity and remained the most dominant style of writing practiced by Ottoman calligraphers until the late eleventh/seventeenth century (Blair 2006, 480–81). It was then that another court calligrapher, Hafız Osman (d. 1110/1698) developed his own unique style of writing by revising and updating the earlier style of Şeyh Hamdullah (Müstakimzâde 2014, 276). The newly inaugurated style of Hafız Osman went on to dominate the Ottoman cultural landscape of the late eleventh/seventeenth and early twelfth/eighteenth centuries, eventually superseding the earlier style of Şeyh Hamdullah, which was subsequently abandoned (Derman 1999, 19). Hafız Osman's style continued to retain a strong cultural relevance over the next two hundred years and provided a source of inspiration for a series of twelfth/eighteenth and thirteenth/nineteenth-century calligraphers who went on to inaugurate their own unique styles of calligraphy. These later calligraphers included Mustafa Râkım (d. 1241/1826), Mehmed Şevki Efendi (d. 1304/1887), Mahmud Celâleddin (d. 1245/1829), Kazasker Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d. 1293/1876), and Sâmi Efendi (d. 1330/1912) (Serin 1999; Alparslan 1999; Derman 1999; Blair 2006). The styles and methods developed by these late Ottoman calligraphers did not disappear with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1342/1923 but remained in the hands of several late Ottoman calligraphers such as Hamid Aytaç (1309–1402/1891–1982), Mustafa Halîm Özyazıcı (1315–1384/1898–1964), and Necmeddin Okyay (1300–1396/1883–1976), whose lifetimes spanned the chronological divide between the Ottoman Empire and the contemporary Turkish Republic (Alparslan 1999, 99–100; Eriş 2011; Berk 2011, 2015).

As a designative term, “Ottoman calligraphy” refers to the set of aesthetic, discursive, and ritual traditions practiced and followed by such calligraphers during the chronological and geographical scope defined by the Ottoman Empire (699–1342/1299–1923). Although practitioners of calligraphy never subscribed to a formal guild, nor were they represented by an institutional body, they were, nevertheless, guided by the common objective of producing beautiful texts and teaching and underwent the same rigorous training to graduate as calligraphers. This graduation into the world of mastery was carefully controlled by existing master calligraphers and thus ensured some semblance of a bounded “insider” community of calligraphers united by a common aesthetic, ritualistic, and pedagogical framework. As such, it is common to find in the Ottoman primary sources context-specific denominations, such as *ehl-i hatt* (the brethren of calligraphy) (Müstakimzâde 2014, 537), *ashâb-ı hutût u aklâm* (the brethren of calligraphy and the pen), *erbâb-ı kitâbet ü erkâm* (masters of scribal activity and writing), as well as many others, that index Ottoman calligraphers as a collective body. This chapter thus uses the term “Ottoman calligraphers” as an umbrella category for practitioners of calligraphy during the Ottoman Empire who underwent the traditional apprenticeship system and graduated into mastery, although it is certainly acknowledged here that there may be a degree of slippage within this designative category, and that calligraphers did not always subscribe to the same artistic, theological, or ethical philosophies across time and space.

3 The Ethics of Ottoman Calligraphy

The question of what it meant to be a calligrapher during the Ottoman period is imbricated with ethical considerations. As substantiated by numerous passages in the Ottoman biographical compendia, calligraphers did not enforce a strict division between their personal and professional identities; to be a “good” or “successful” calligrapher was to achieve mastery in the arts by cultivating both talent and temperament, and the aesthetic, spiritual, and ontological status of one’s work was often contingent upon the moral values of its maker (Mustafa ‘Âlî 2011, 125, 268; Müstakimzâde 2014, 537). Much of the ethical responsibility incumbent upon the calligrapher proceeded from the premise that calligraphy, as both object and action, was adjudged to be highly sacrosanct. Of all the arts, calligraphy, in particular, was assigned an elevated status due to its inherent utility in transcribing, preserving, and adorning the Holy Qur’ân, believed by Muslims to be the literal Word of God. The importance of the pen was also assured through explicit citations in the Qur’ân, one

of which alluded to the indispensable role played by the Pen in communicating the knowledge of God to mankind (Q 96:4).¹ These Qur'ānic verses were supported by numerous *ḥadīths* (traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad) that explicitly sanctioned and enumerated the manifold blessings and virtues of beautiful writing (Müstakimzâde 2014, 7–20). Correspondingly, the art of calligraphy, in terms of epistemology and practice, was distinguished as a sacred body of knowledge and a sacred duty, respectively.

Documentary sources concerning the Ottoman disposition towards calligraphy are mostly found in the prefaces and introductions of technical treatises on calligraphy and the biographical dictionaries of Ottoman calligraphers. In the Ottoman genre of texts dedicated to art and architecture, prefaces and introductory overtures were composed primarily to introduce readers to the historical, aesthetic, ethical, intellectual, and spiritual principles underpinning a particular art or craft. In the case of literature dedicated to calligraphy, prefaces and introductions also included sophisticated discourses on the divine origins of writing, accounts of its historical transmission, engaging discussions on the aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual merits of calligraphy (constructed through commentaries on the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*), and religious and personal justifications for composing the text.

One of the most defining features of Ottoman prefatory traditions in calligraphy, and indeed of the broader genre of Ottoman literary works on art and architecture in general, is the ubiquitous engagement with the Qur'ān as a means of establishing a theological foundation for artistic practice. The centrality of the Qur'ān in Ottoman society scarcely needs emphasizing here, but it is perhaps worth reiterating that for most Muslims, the Qur'ān, alongside the *ḥadīth*, is believed to be the ultimate source of truth, morality, and ethics. That being so, divine action and the commended acts and activities that prophets engaged with are accordingly regarded as virtues and thus worthy of emulation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Ottoman authors frequently gravitated towards scripture as a means of reconciling specific artistic endeavors with a broader set of ethical principles based on the Qur'ān. To use an instructive example, in the autobiographical memoirs of the Ottoman chief architect Mimar Sinân (d. 965/1588), narrated shortly before his death to the poet-painter Mustafa Sâî Çelebi (d. 1004/1595–1596), the *Risâletü'l-Mî'mâriyye* ("Treatise

1 Although there are four explicit citations of the pen (Ar., *qalam*, pl. *aqlām*) in the Qur'ān (3:44, 31:27, 68:1, 96:4), the verses cited most frequently in the Ottoman treatise on calligraphy and biographical dictionaries of calligraphers are those from *sūrat al-'Alaq* (The Clot, 96:4) and *sūrat al-Qalam* (The Pen, 68:1). All translations of Qur'ānic verses in this chapter follow Pickthall 1996.

on Architecture”) commences with the Qur’ānic passage: “And We have built above you seven strong (heavens)” (Q 78:12) (Mustafa Sâî Çelebi 2006, 58). This initial reference to building confers legitimacy upon the discipline of architecture within the authoritative space of the Qur’ān, consecrating the act of construction as an earthly reflection of the Divine Action of the Supreme Architect. Accordingly, Mimar Sinan (d. 996/1588), the architect and supervisor of close to a hundred and fifty mosques and several hundred other construction projects, is designated as an exemplum of Muslim living by virtue of his mastery over the architectural sciences.²

In seeking to develop both an ethical basis for practice as well as a theological foundation for the calligraphic arts, however, writers on calligraphy confronted a relative scarcity of Qur’ānic verses that explicitly cited scribes or prescribed the ethics or rules of calligraphic practice. Unlike the practice of carpentry or metallurgy, which could be endorsed through Qur’ānic narratives of the prophet Noah (Q 11:37–38, 23:27) and the prophet David (Q 21:80, 34:10–11) respectively, there are no prophetic authorities cited in the Qur’ān that partook in the art of beautiful writing. Nevertheless, authors were still able to develop a sophisticated apologetic prefatory tradition for the art of calligraphy. This, they accomplished through the strategic selection of specific verses from the Qur’ān, which, when combined with traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad and other narrations, culminated in a narrative prolegomenon that actively endorsed the art of calligraphy and established its theological and ethical foundations. These prefatory traditions are to be found in Ottoman treatises on calligraphy and biographical dictionaries of calligraphers.

3.1 *Ottoman Treatises and Biographical Dictionaries*

The Ottoman treatises or *risâles* constituted a genre of educational literature that instructed readers how to prepare the necessary materials for calligraphy (such as how to prepare the calligrapher’s pen, ink, and paper) as well as how to construct individual letters, ligatures, and letter combinations in a variety of scripts and styles. Rather than being a substitute for a qualified master, however, the *risâles* served as guides that complemented the knowledge that was transmitted by master calligraphers to their apprentices. In most cases, the main content of the treatises was prefaced with an introduction that established an intellectual, ethical, and spiritual context for the ensuing technical descriptions.

2 As Gülrü Necipoğlu observes, the symbolic connection between the Divine Architect and Sinan is further manifested in the biographer Sâî’s descriptions of “imperial mosques as microcosmic representations of the universe” (Necipoğlu 2006, xv).

As early as the tenth/sixteenth century, Ottoman chroniclers also developed a literary genre that constructed the history of Ottoman calligraphy through a genealogical chain of master calligraphers, outlining the route by which the knowledge of calligraphy was transmitted over time and space and describing the origins, merits, and personalities of those calligraphers who transmitted it. As Esra Akin-Kıvanç observes (Mustafa Âlî 2011, 87–88), this literary genre, commonly referred to as the “biographical” genre, coalesced four different categories of writing: *menâkibnâmes* (also known as *tabakât*, hagiographical biographies which referred to the subject’s commendable moral qualities), *tez-kires* (biographical compendiums), album prefaces, and technical manuals. To these can be added *silsiles* (historical genealogies) and *evâ’ils* (description of origins). Much like the technical treatises, the biographical dictionaries were prefaced with an introductory overture that established a discursive context that informed the reception of the biographies that followed. It is to these prefatory traditions that this chapter now turns; for the purpose of structure, the following section is divided according to the text under examination.

3.1.1 Hâfizzâde’s *Risâle-i Hat*

In the opening section of one of the earliest known treatises on calligraphy from the Ottoman period, Hâfizzâde’s (d. unknown) *Risâle-i Hat* (“Treatise on Calligraphy,” completed 900–950/1495–1543),³ the author opens in the broader context of discussing the essentially ethical nature of true knowledge, avowing that the pursuit of the knowledge of God, as well as the knowledge of one’s own soul, is compliant with the Qur’ân and *ḥadīth*, in that it leads to the unveiling of deeply profound truths concerning both the inner and outer aspects of the religion of Islam (Hâfizzâde 2014, 74–78). Within this context, Hâfizzâde identifies the study of calligraphy as a key to the direct and intimate knowledge of

3 Not much is known of the author Hâfizzâde, other than the fact that his real name was Ebu’l-Me’âlî, he previously worked as a judge in Filibe (Plovdiv), and that he was honored and respected by his contemporaries for his outstanding talents in poetry and every religious science and craft. He is also known to have studied both calligraphy and the Islamic religious sciences from his father and his uncle (Sehî Bey 1980, 97; Nevîzâde Atâî 1989, 339; Akün 1997, 81; Hâfizzâde 2014, 25–26). The exact date that Hâfizzâde composed the *Risâle-i Hatt* is unknown. However, the earliest surviving example of the manuscript is a copy dated 950/1543–1544 attributed to the scribe “Sinan” (this manuscript is held in the Bursa Eski Yazma ve Basma Eserler Kütüphanesi (The Bursa Library of Ancient Manuscripts and Printed Works), Genel Böl., ms no 1912). According to this date, Sadettin Eğri places the composition of the original work within a date range of 900–950/1495–1543 (Hâfizzâde 2014, 33). A later copy of the *Risâle-i Hatt* was made by Mehmed bin Hüsâmeddin in 1061/1651 and is currently held in the Süleymaniye Archive in Istanbul (Esad Efendi, ms no 3783). Ali Haydar Bayat estimates a date of around 1530–1540 (Fîrûz 2007, 5).

God, distinguishing the “science of calligraphy” (*ilm-i hat*) as one of the highest and most praiseworthy forms of knowledge known to man:

In this world, there are many sciences and crafts,
But there is nothing [that compares to] the blessedness and beauty of the
knowledge of calligraphy.
This craft is a member of the fellowship of knowledge,
And held in the highest esteem by the great and wise.

HÂFIZZÂDE 2014, 84

In order to further vindicate his position, Hâfizzâde cites a narration from Prophet Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), concerning the heavenly gifts of beautiful writing, and then conveys the following poetic narrative on the subject of the cosmic unfolding of creation:

Before Allah—the Supreme Creator of the two worlds—had created the
heavenly firmaments,
He created and brought forth the Pen.
At that moment, there was nothing but the Pen,
And with a majestic Word, He gave the following order:
Observe my commands, and write on the Preserved Tablet [*Levh-i Mahfûz*]!
Oh, my companion! Attend to my words: the Pen listened to the order of
God,
And began to write on the Preserved Tablet.
And on the Tablet, the Pen inscribed a *nuqta*⁴ created of pure light,
And that *nuqta* was indeed “light upon light.”

HÂFIZZÂDE 2014, 87⁵

Here, Hâfizzâde delivers a powerful rendering of the metaphysical origins of calligraphy, using a combination of both direct citation as well as allusion to specific Qur'ānic verses. Hâfizzâde begins the creation narrative above with a reference to the Pen and the Preserved Tablet, as cited in the following passages of the Qur'ān:

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- 4 *Nuqta*: A rhomboid-shaped dot employed as a fixed unit of measurement in calligraphy. The *nuqta* itself was fashioned by making a diagonal movement of the pen towards the bottom right, thus creating an active square with roughly equal sides. Crucially, the length of each side of the *nuqta* was exactly the same as the width of the nib of the pen, thus creating a flexible unit of measurement that could be applied to any size or format of calligraphy.
- 5 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

Nūn. By the pen and that which they write (therewith).

Q 68:1

Read: And thy Lord is the Most Bounteous. Who teacheth by the pen.

Q 96:3–4

Nay, but it is a glorious Qurʾān. On a guarded tablet.

Q 85:21–22

Hâfizzâde then incorporates each of these symbolic archetypes into a poetic narrative through allusion to the following *ḥadīth* cited frequently in calligraphic texts: “The first thing that God created was the pen. And it transcribed all the affairs that shall come to pass until the Day of Judgement.”⁶ Through allusion to this *ḥadīth*, Hâfizzâde “activates” the non-narrativized Qurʾānic verses into a narrative by locating the Pen and the Preserved Tablet within a divine cosmogony that begins with the creation of the Pen and a command to write on the Preserved Tablet. The passage then concludes with a direct citation from the Qurʾānic Light verse (“light upon light” (*nūr ʿalā nūr*), Q 24:35) in connection with the luminous first act of creation (which Hâfizzâde describes as the transcribing of a *nuqṭa* of pure light onto the Preserved Tablet), once again transposing Qurʾānic verses into an economy of meaning-making conveyed through the narrative description.

Hâfizzâde’s expressive opening to the preface thus delivers several principles that validate the study of calligraphy as a virtue-based ethical pursuit that conforms to the broader epistemological fabric of religious and mystical knowledge. Furthermore, through the narrativization of the Qurʾānic archetypes of the Pen and Sacred Tablet, Hâfizzâde establishes a cosmological framework for the practice of calligraphy, elevating the tools of calligraphy to an exalted spiritual status and rendering the *nuqṭa* as the foundational principle of the created universe. Hâfizzâde thus effectively designates the science of calligraphy—a science that applies the *nuqṭa* as a fixed unit of measurement to determine the specific dimensions of individuals and letter units—as a sacred body of knowledge mirroring the divine archetypal acts of creation. Accordingly, Hâfizzâde’s ensuing treatise on how to construct the individual letters in the *muḥaqqaq*, *naskh*, and *thuluth* scripts through the use of the *nuqṭa* not only reads as an instructive guide to writing but also as an initiation

6 As cited in Nefeszâde İbrahim Efendi’s (d. 1060/1650) eleventh/seventeenth century treatise on calligraphy, *Gülzâr-ı Savâb*: “*Hak Te’âlâ’nın evvel-i mahtûku kalemdir ki, halk edip ana kitâbet ile emreyledi. Kalem dahi ilâ-yevmi’l kıyame olacak umûru yazdı*” (Demir 2004, 42). The original *ḥadīth* can be found in al-Tirmidhî 2007, 53, no 3319.

into a realm of sacred knowledge; to follow the rules of calligraphy laid out here is to pursue the knowledge of God and embark upon an ethical journey towards religious and intellectual enlightenment.

This hermeneutical reading of Hâfizzâde's treatise is largely corroborated by Hâfizzâde's concluding statements after the treatise, in which he congratulates his readers with the following laudatory verses:

This [text] is an elixir that causes the rose to bloom,
Expressed in seventy-two languages.
If you have managed to read this book,
Then the veil of "Thou wilt not see Me" will be removed,
At that moment, God's Spiritual Light will become manifest to you.
Verily, you will be shown the true knowledge of life's existence,
And [It] will reveal to you the essence [of life].
And [any] fear of death or depression will be removed.
As it is for the prophet Hızır, existence will be brought to life,
And the season of spring will be rendered propitious.

HÂFIZZÂDE 2014, 136

Hâfizzâde's epilogue evidently renders the study of calligraphy as a profoundly spiritual and ethical exercise that leads to the unveiling of divine mysteries. A closer inspection also reveals that Hâfizzâde's concluding verses seek to corroborate his earlier contention that distinguishes calligraphy as a form of gnosis. This sentiment is upheld through recourse to a Qur'ānic story involving the prophet Moses, identified in the poetic verse that begins with "Then the veil of ...," which includes a direct citation of a Qur'ānic verse (italicized below) in which God informs Moses that His Glory is too great for human eyes:

And when Moses came to Our appointed tryst, and his Lord had spoken unto him, he said: My Lord! Show me (Thy Self), that I may gaze upon Thee. He said: *Thou wilt not see Me*, but gaze upon the mountain! If it stands still in its place, then thou wilt see Me. And when his Lord revealed (His) glory to the mountain, He sent it crashing down. And Moses fell down senseless. And when he woke, he said: Glory unto Thee! I turn unto Thee repentant, and I am the first of (true) believers.

Q 7:143

Hâfizzâde's affirmation that the pursuit of calligraphy effectively removes the veil of *Thou wilt not see Me* thus posits the designation of calligraphic knowledge as a sanctified and safeguarded correlative of the knowledge sought after by prophetic authority. As Hâfizzâde claims several verses later, this is the very

same category of knowledge possessed by the prophet Khidr, named by later Islamic scholars as the figure described in the Qur'ān (18:65–82), who accompanies and is questioned by the prophet Moses and possesses a secret knowledge to which the prophet Moses is not privy. This is knowledge, the most basic characteristic of which is compliance with the textual sources of Islamic society, the Qur'ān, the *ḥadīth*, and the example of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, that leads to the spiritual transmutation of the soul and the intellect; it is at once above and beyond rational modes of inquiry, yet at the same time cultivated through practical study under a certified master.

In the absence of specific Qur'ānic verses that either endorse the calligraphic arts or establish an ethical foundation for practice, therefore, Hâfizzâde incentivizes the study of calligraphy in two ways that have been discussed here. Firstly, Hâfizzâde selectively combines certain passages from the Qur'ān with a *ḥadīth* to construct a creation narrative that concludes with the act of writing, thus identifying calligraphy as an artistic practice that reflects the cosmic unfolding of creation. Secondly, Hâfizzâde designates the pursuit of calligraphy as an intellectual and spiritual body of knowledge, thus forming a link not only with the knowledge held by prophetic authorities mentioned in the Qur'ān but also tacitly invoking apprentice calligraphers to approach the study of calligraphy with the same ethical approaches and responsibilities as they would if they were studying other religious forms of instruction. Hâfizzâde thus contributes a powerful discursive and intellectual conception of calligraphy enveloped in a narrativizing organizational structure conducive to advocating the serious study of a transformative nature. This can be seen in the arrangement of the *risâle*, which moves the reader from epistemological and ethical principles to practical study. As Hâfizzâde claims, it is a journey so well charted that by finishing the treatise, the apprentice calligrapher can not only achieve competence in the calligraphic arts but also arrive completely spiritually transformed.⁷

Before continuing, it will be instructive to take a preparatory pause to reiterate that cultural traditions, do not, of course, take place in a vacuum. The Ottoman prefatory traditions investigated here most likely contain elements

7 Due to the limits of space, the prefaces of two other important treatises on Ottoman calligraphy could not be investigated here, however, both can be seen to engage with Qur'ānic verses to establish an ethical context for the knowledge of calligraphy. See Fîrûz Bâli Efendi's (d. after 984/1576) *Mîzânü'l-Hatt* ("Measurement of Writing," completed in 962/1555) (Fîrûz 2007), and Mehmed Tâcettîn's (d. 996/1587) treatise on the rules of the *sülûs* script, *Risâle-i Kavâid-i Hatt* ("Treatise on the Rules of Calligraphy"). Tâcettîn's treatise was identified by Abdülhamid Tüfekçioğlu as a translation of an unknown Persian original (Tüfekçioğlu 1997). A copy of the treatise transcribed by the Ottoman calligrapher Kebecizâde Mehmed Vasfî Efendi (d. 1248/1831) is held in the Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library Special Collections, Michigan University, MS 401.

that have been informed and produced through an array of literary, discursive, and hermeneutical engagements with Persianate art historical writing that preceded them. Such writings have been extensively outlined in Roxburgh's masterful study of ten album prefaces written in Persian between the years 896/1491 and 1018/1609, a reading of which elicits numerous parallels between the Persian and Ottoman prefatory traditions, including the use of narrative motifs, genealogy, and a shared repertoire of Qur'ānic verses and *ḥadīth* (Roxburgh 2001). Yet, such commonalities do not provide evidence of either direct transmission or imitation, and while a comparative study of prefatory traditions across the formulaic scope of Ottoman and Persianate literature is certainly instructive, research on the Ottoman side still requires more investigation on the historical side. Furthermore, Ottoman calligraphy developed into a highly distinct aesthetic tradition, and the literary constructions, motifs, and figures of speech that define the Ottoman prefatory tradition are certainly unique enough to warrant individual treatment here, but it is hoped that the guided focus on Ottoman narratives in this chapter contributes towards future studies from a comparative perspective.

3.1.2 Mustafa Âli's *Menâkib-i Hünerverân*

Mustafa Âli's (d. 1008/1600), tenth/sixteenth-century biographical account of nearly two hundred and seventy calligraphers and painters, the *Menâkib-i Hünerverân* ("The Epic Deeds of Artists," completed in 995/1587),⁸ translated into English by Esra Akın-Kıvanç (Mustafa Âli 2011), commences with a citation of two distinct verses from the Qur'ān (Q 82:11–12 and 83:20–21), both of which refer to the written record of the deeds of men. Âli then continues to describe how God, the Almighty Scribe of the "school of creation," effectively "wrote" the universe, messengerhood, and prophethood into being by transcribing the Arabic letters *kāf*, *rā'*, and *nūn*, respectively (Mustafa Âli 2011, 160). The Almighty Scribe also transformed divine light into revelation by writing down Qur'ānic verses such as 68:1 with His Reed Pen:

And the Reed Pen of perpetual creation and Scribe of eternal predestination [i.e., God], by turning the reception of [divine] light into a bright and visible path [i.e., by revealing the Qur'ān] with manifest lines like the illustrious Qur'ānic verse "*Nūn* and the Pen," made the jewels of His Pen into pure pearls excellence. Praise to [God] who made fragrance flow

8 Mustafa Âli was a calligrapher himself and one of the most prolific Ottoman scholars and historians of the tenth/sixteenth century. Âli studied calligraphy under Şükrullah Pir Mehmed Dede (d. 988/1580), the grandson of Şeyh Hamdullah (Mustafa Âli 1926, 30). For an extensive biography of Mustafa Âli, see Fleischer 1986.

over camphor. "And a Scripture inscribed, on fine parchment unrolled." God is the Protector Friend of those who believe. He bringeth them out of darkness into Light.

translation from MUSTAFA 'ÂLÎ 2011, 160–161

In this passage, Âlî formulates a creation narrative that culminates with Qur'ānic revelation that brings believers out of "darkness into Light." Qur'ānic verses such as 52:2–3 ("And a Scripture inscribed, on fine parchment unrolled"), 2:257 ("He bringeth them out of darkness into light"), and 68:1 ("Nūn. By the pen and that which they write (therewith)") are also selectively inserted here to confer both scriptural authority as well as structural clarity to the narrative. Âlî also cites two Qur'ānic verses (52:2–3 and 68:1) that make direct reference to tools that are related to the scribal arts, thus drawing a succinct connection between the practice of calligraphy and the cosmogenic unfolding of creation.

The instrumental role played by the pen is then developed further, as Âlî cites the aforementioned *ḥadīth* ("The first thing God created was the Pen") (Mustafa 'Âlî 2011, 162) and describes the indispensable role played by the pen in transcribing the pages of time and the Qur'ān, whose:

elegant prose would not have been possible to record without a pen ... Furthermore, great messengers succeeded in executing divine orders through the revelation of honorable pages [of the Qur'ān]. And chosen prophets commanded acts of kindness and righteousness and proscribed disapproved [deeds] by compulsory submission to the verses of the Books of Messengers.

MUSTAFA 'ÂLÎ 2011, 162

Thus, according to Âlî's logic, the ethical choices commended by prophets were prescribed by revelation, whose "transcription," symbolic, literal, or otherwise, was brought into existence by the pen. The pen thus not only played an integral role in the inception of creation and the Qur'ān but also in the development of ethics and moral values.

In his "Introduction" (*Mukaddime*), Âlî then advances as proof of the honor and sacredness of writing three separate Qur'ānic verses, one of which refers to the Qur'ānic story of Moses ("And We wrote for him, upon the tablets," Q 7:145). This verse is cited in conjunction with 58:21 ("Allah hath decreed [literally: Written]: Lo! I verily shall conquer, I and My messengers") and Q 68:1 ("Nūn. By the pen and that which they write [therewith]"), thus further buttressing Âlî's affirmation of the symbolic connections between calligraphy, the Reed Pen of creation, the Almighty Scribe and divine transcription, and the pen as a tool

for ethical instruction. Âli's hermeneutical nexus forms a direct link with one of the most profound conclusions proffered in his preface, in which Âli avows that calligraphers and scribes are the most virtuous of people, for it is they who have executed divine orders by copying the Qur'ān and other sacred texts: "In addition [the aforementioned *ḥadīth*] emphasizes the fact that, among implements, the Tablet and the Pen are holier than all others, while penmen are the most virtuous of people" (Mustafa 'Âlī 2011, 162–163).

Such striking yet edifying passages reflect the integral relationships between scripture, calligraphy, knowledge, and ethics that Âli seeks to advance in this seminal text. Of particular relevance is the expressive narrativization of Qur'ānic verses encountered in Âli's introductory overture, a narrativization that disposes, locates, and weaves together specific Qur'ānic verses into textual interplay with a rich tapestry of *ḥadīths*, theological credendum, Sufi thought, and calligraphic lore. Through this narrativization, Âli engages in an exegetical and hermeneutical exercise whereby the multiple meanings of Qur'ānic verses, prophetic stories, and calligraphic narratives are explained through mutually embedded intertextual engagement, contributing a compelling prefatory narrative that engages with scriptural commentary and syllogism, all conveyed through an intellectual and discursive architecture seriously conducive to establishing a scriptural, theological, and ethical foundation for the calligraphic arts.

3.2 *The Epic Deeds and the Ethical Dimensions of the Calligrapher*

Âli's designation of penmen as saintly individuals informs the reception of calligraphers in the remainder of his text, which consists of biographical descriptions of calligraphers. Here, the history of calligraphy is traced through a pedagogical lineage of masters and disciples commencing with prophets and pre-Islamic religious figures. The lineage of Islamic calligraphy commences proper with 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the first copyists of the Qur'ān and continues through the centuries to the calligraphers of the tenth/sixteenth century. In light of Âli's designation of calligraphy as an ethical form of knowledge, however, Âli's vantage point when describing calligraphers is not defined by that of just an aesthetic critic but also of one eager to affirm the importance of religion, ethics, and morality to the professional identity of a calligrapher. Âli is keen to emphasize in consideration of the sanctity of writing that a true calligrapher must necessarily be an ethical being, and his artistic identity is as, if not more, dependent upon, his character traits than his talent.

This conviction is largely supported by the content of the biographical entries themselves, in which Âli repeatedly underscores the virtues and even miracles accomplished by calligraphers. For Âli, calligraphy is both a moral and moralizing medium that demands the one who possesses it to live an ethical life:

In short, fine calligraphy is a virtue that unstintingly confers honor upon those who possess it. And the art of writing is a path toward nobility and fame, which leads those who command it to glory and high station, unless they are reproached by people for bad morals, or are notorious [for their] addition to opium paste, opium or hashish.

MUSTAFA 'ÂLÎ 2011, 204

As Âli affirms here, the ethical and moral status of the calligrapher is predicated upon the art and act of writing. However, the calligrapher's honor is also diminished through acts of moral turpitude (such as being addicted to hashish), indexing a conception of calligraphy as a parallel form of knowledge to other classical Islamic sciences (such as the *ḥadīth*), in which the verity of transmitted knowledge is often held contingent upon the character of the transmitter. The connection between art and ethics is further corroborated by Âli's strong belief that both the aesthetic, as well as the monetary value of a particular work, were inherently proportional to the virtues of its producer. As Akın-Kıvanç observes (Mustafa 'Âlî 2011, 125), in Âli's account of Shāh Qulī Naqqāsh (fl. mid-tenth/sixteenth century), for example, Âli renders Qulī Naqqāsh's art less valuable on account of his lack of moral and spiritual integrity:

Had he possessed morals as [as excellent] his art, Bihzad in his day could not have achieved the fame he did. And had he, in accordance with his conscientious nature, become a wayfarer on the path of divine observance, people would not in his time have talked about the art, reputation, and works of Mani, the pillar [of the art of painting].

translation from MUSTAFA 'ÂLÎ 2011, 268

As Âli attempts to convey here, the discord between Shāh Qulī's ethics and his artistic abilities served as a barrier to Shāh Qulī achieving widespread aesthetic success. Âli thus clearly adopts a non-Cartesian approach to calligraphy, encouraging a mutual imbrication of practice, ethics, and aesthetics. This approach to calligraphy and calligraphers is the logical outcome of Âli's prefatory discourse, which identifies calligraphy as an ethical body of knowledge entrusted to prophetic authorities and virtuous scribes.

3.2.1 Nefeszâde İbrahim Efendi's *Gülzâr-ı Savâb*

The authors of several other Ottoman biographical dictionaries of calligraphers present a similar concern for the ethics of the penman and like Hâfizzâde and Âli, engage with Qur'ānic verses in order to establish a discursive theological

context for prosopography. The *Mukaddime* of Nefeszâde İbrahim Efendi's (d. 1060/1650) treatise and biographical dictionary, *Gülzâr-ı Savâb* ("The Rose Garden of Proper Conduct"),⁹ commences with specific citations of verses from *sûrat al-Alaq* (The Clot) and *sûrat al-Qalam* (The Pen). According to Nefeszâde's exegesis, sufficient proof of the ethical nature of calligraphy is demonstrated by the nexus God establishes between Himself and creation through self-revelation via the pen (Q 96:4) (Demir 2004, 41). The honorable status of calligraphy is further vindicated by the fact that God swears by the pen in the Qur'ân (68:1) (Demir 2004, 41). Nefeszâde then argues for the intellectual virtues of writing, clarifying that:

With regards to the intellect, the virtues of calligraphy are such [i.e., proven], that if calligraphy were not [so] honored, God the True and Exalted would not have sent writing down to the venerable prophet Adam, peace be upon him, [and] to the venerable prophets İdrîs and Hüd, peace be upon them. And He sent down the inscribed tablets to the venerable prophet Moses, peace be upon him. These virtues are sufficient [proof] for calligraphy and writing.

DEMİR 2004, 42

Nefeszâde thus cites the Qur'anic story of Moses (Q 7:145, 7:150, and 7:154) in an attempt to further bestow legitimacy on the art of calligraphy within the authoritative spaces of divine revelation and prophecy. Nefeszâde then continues by repeating the aforementioned *ḥadīth* concerning the creation of the pen: "The first thing that God created was the pen. And it transcribed all of the affairs that shall come to pass until the Day of Judgement" (Demir 2004, 42), before commenting on a series of narrations concerning the virtues of calligraphy cited from prescriptive works such as legal, theological, and creedal texts (Demir 2004, 43–48). Nefeszâde's exposition on the power of the written word

9 Nefeszâde studied calligraphy from his father Amasyalı Mustafa Nefeszâde (a calligrapher and teacher of religious education, d. unknown) before continuing his studies with the eleventh/seventeenth-century master of the Karahisârî School of writing, Demircikulu Yusuf Efendi (d. 1020/1611), from whom Nefeszâde received his diploma in the *thuluth* and *naskh* scripts. Although Nefeszâde is reported as being a fine calligrapher who earned the respect of his peers, there are no known surviving examples of his work (Habib 1305, 88–89; Suyolcuâde 1942, 10; Müstakimzâde 2014, 42). Mustafa Hilmi Hakkâkzâde's (d. 1268/1852) treatise on calligraphy *Mizânü'l-Hatt Alâ Vaz'î'l-Üstâdî's-Selef* ("The Proportions of Calligraphy [as] Established by the Illustrious Historical Masters, completed 1266/1849) also incorporates the text of the *Gülzâr-ı Savâb* and includes an original dedication to sultan Murad IV (r. 1032–1049/1623–1640) not included in Kilisli Muallim Rifat's edited version of the *Gülzâr-ı Savâb* (Hakkâkzâde 1986, 110–114).

then reflects heavily on his subsequent treatment of prosopography; illustrious master calligraphers, such as Yāqūt al-Musta‘īmī (d. 698/1298), Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 926/1520), and Ahmed Karahisârî (d. 963/1556)—masters that activate, embody, and exemplify the ethics of knowledge advanced in his introductory overture—are frequently described as noteworthy representatives of Muslim living, and their individual biographies are peppered with miraculous stories, and that attest to their exemplary piety.

3.2.2 Mehmed Necîb Suyolcuzâde's *Devhatü'l Küttâb*

The introductory chapter on the “virtues of calligraphy” (*fezâ'il-i hutût*) from Mehmed Necîb Suyolcuzâde's (d. 1171/1758)¹⁰ biographical dictionary of calligraphers, *Devhatü'l Küttâb* (“The Genealogical Tree of Scribes,” completed in 1150/1737), commences with a similar commentary and exegesis of the Qur'anic verses cited in the *Gülzâr-ı Savâb*. As Suyolcuzâde explains, the Qur'anic verse 96:4 is a sign that learning calligraphy (*ta'lim-i hatt*) is enumerated amongst the blessings of God for His righteous believers. Furthermore, the fact that God swears by the Pen in the Qur'anic verse 68:1 is a firm indication that the scribal arts are elevated above others in both honor and virtue (Yaman 2003, 45). After establishing a symbolic connection between the Qur'anic Pen and the practice of calligraphy, Suyolcuzâde proceeds to cite a series of Qur'anic verses, scriptural commentaries, *ḥadīths*, and transmitted reports in support of the virtues of calligraphy, many of which comprise narratives concerning the creation of the Pen and the Preserved Tablet (Yaman 2003, 45–51). Although there are far too many to cite here, one particularly demonstrative passage is quoted from İbn-i Seyyid Ali's (d. 931/1524) *Şerhi Şir'atü'l-İslam* (“Commentary on the Path of Islam”), which narrates how God created the Pen from pearl or ruby, and He created ink from light. This luminous ink follows the teeth of the Pen, which speak in a language intelligible only to the angel Isrâfîl. The Pen's dimensions are so expansive that it would take a man five hundred years to run from one end to the other, and its five hundred nodes are separated by a further five hundred years ride on horseback. According to the narration, the Pen will continue to write on the Preserved Tablet until the Day of Judgement; the Preserved Tablet is also protected from Satan and inscribed with the Holy Qur'ân (Yaman 2003, 46).

10 Born in Eyüp, Mehmed Necîb Suyolcuzâde received his *icâzet* in calligraphy after studying the (“Six Pens”) from Ağakapılı İsmâil Efendi (d. 1118/1706), and then continued his studies in calligraphy by taking lessons from Kurşuncuzâde Ahmed Efendi (d. 1120/1708) and Yedikuleli Seyyid Abdullah Efendi (d. 1144/1731). Mehmed Necîb was also a poet and served as a judge and secretary to the treasurer of the sultan's harem (see Suyolcuzâde 1942, 70; Müstakimzâde 2014, 436–438).

Following the introductory overture, Suyolcuzâde dedicates the main part of his biographical dictionary to the biographies of Ottoman calligraphers (as well as several of their illustrious predecessors), disclosing the professional and artistic as well as ethical and spiritual accomplishments that befit individuals dedicating their lives to the scribal arts. In his entry on the calligrapher Mehmed Efendi Çörekciâde (d. 1173/1759), for example, Suyolcuzâde provides details of his early education and praises Çörekciâde's talent in the calligraphic arts. Suyolcuzâde then concludes the biographical entry with the following description: "The beauty of his [Çörekciâde's] character and disposition is comparable to the matchless beauty of his calligraphy, [in that] he does not engage in gossip or idle talk, is strongly bodied, and is of angelic nature" (*hüsn-i ahlâk ve şemâili, hüsn-i hatt-ı bî mu'âdili gibi olduğu bî-kîl ü kâl, vücûd-ı bihbûd, melekîyyü'l hisâldir*) (Yaman 2003, 297). Here, the registers of the aesthetic and ethical are enmeshed in a synthesis that exemplifies the integral relationship between calligraphy and ethics that Suyolcuzâde seeks to establish in his discursive introduction. The beauty of writing reflects positively on the beauty of character, and Çörekciâde's mindful engagement with calligraphy illustrates his piety and ethical standing.

3.2.3 Müstakimzâde Süleymân Sa'deddîn Efendi's *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn*
Of the texts discussed thus far, Müstakimzâde Süleymân Sa'deddîn Efendi's (1202/1788) biographical dictionary of calligraphers, the *Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn* ("Gifts of the Calligraphers," compiled between 1173/1759 and 1202/1787, from here on, the *Tuhfe*), includes the most explicit references to the ethical responsibilities incumbent upon the calligrapher.¹¹ The *Tuhfe*'s preamble (*dibâce*) begins with a brief narrative description of how God raised the Pen of Enlightenment (*qalam al-fayḍ*) from the inkpot of non-existence (*nûn al-'adam*), and caused the Pen to flow over the created Tablet (*lawḥ al-ijād*), thus fashioning creation into being (Müstakimzâde 2014, 3). Müstakimzâde then delivers an exposition on the *basmala* and provides a comprehensive commentary on no less than forty *ḥadīths* that extol the virtues of writing (Müstakimzâde 2014, 3–6, 7–20). Of these *ḥadīths*, two to four refer specifically to cosmogony, identifying the Pen and Tablet, both cited in the Qur'ān, as being amongst the first objects of divine creation. In the second cited *ḥadīth*, for example, it is related that "the first thing God created was the Pen" (*awwal mā khalaqa Llāhu l-qalam*), and that: "He created the *Nûn*, and that is the Inkpot, and He created the Tablet and inscribed within it. And then He created the Heavens" (*wa-khalaqa*

11 For a comprehensive biography of Müstakimzâde see Müstakimzâde 2014, xxxv–xxxix, and lxxv–lxxvii.

l-nūn wa-hiya al-dawātu wa-khalaqa l-lawḥ fa-kataba fihi thumma khalaqa l-samāwāt) (Müstakimzâde 2014, 7). The *ḥadīth* that follows also describes how God commanded the Pen to write and will continue to write until the Day of Judgement (Müstakimzâde 2014, 8). Much like the authors that preceded him, therefore, Müstakimzâde engages with narratives whereby the meanings of Qur'ānic verses citing the Pen and Tablet can be informed and explained through intertextual engagement. Furthermore, by engaging with narratives concerning the divine origins of the Pen and Tablet, Müstakimzâde can enter calligraphy into the sphere of ethical knowledge and confer legitimacy upon the scribal arts within the authoritative space of the Islamic discursive tradition.

3.3 *Müstakimzâde and the Applied Ethics of Calligraphy*

For Müstakimzâde, the calligrapher's engagement with an ethical and consecrated body of knowledge such as the science of calligraphy (*ilm-i hatt*) mandates a significant degree of moral propriety. Much of the moral requisites incumbent upon the calligrapher are outlined in Müstakimzâde's thirty-three *sânihas* (reflections), a series of judgments, opinions, and reflections that reads as instructive literature for calligraphers, ranging in subject matter from the ethics of writing to a glossary of materials (Müstakimzâde 2014, 537–564). Like Âli, in the opening, *sâniha* Müstakimzâde identifies the “community of the brethren of calligraphy, and the class of masters of the pen” (*gürûh-ı ehl-i kalemi ve zümre-i erbâb-ı rakamı*) as personages of knowledge and virtue. Müstakimzâde also explains that the subsistence of the sublime caliphate and sultanate is highly contingent upon scribal activity being conducted in an honorable and trustworthy manner. As such, calligraphers and scribes should embody certain character traits that are worthy of respect and admiration; true calligraphers and scribes are those that follow the prescriptions of the religion of Islam closely, remain true to the knowledge of the Qur'ān and Sunna, and endeavor to be chivalrous, modest, and just (Müstakimzâde 2014, 537–538). Also, upon graduation into the world of mastery, calligraphers should pay close heed to the meanings inherent in the works they produce and aim to improve the conditions of their time by writing expressions of counsel and wisdom, such as the recorded sayings of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, the venerated words of the caliphs, and other blessed poems and odes (Müstakimzâde 2014, 538).

It is important, however, not to see the *sânihas* as extraneous or of peripheral concern to Müstakimzâde's prosopographical project. On the contrary, the *sânihas* should be understood as an interpretive magnifying glass that augments and expands an ethical reading of the biographical entries. In *sâniha* one (Müstakimzâde 2014, 537–539), twenty-three (Müstakimzâde 2014, 556–7), and

twenty-four (Müstakimzâde 2014, 556–557), for example, Müstakimzâde counsels master calligraphers and apprentices to be gracious, respectful, and serve one another in the pursuit of calligraphy, citing Qur'ānic verses and narrations of the Prophet Muḥammad to support his counsel. Similarly, Müstakimzâde admonishes calligraphers who fail to share their knowledge with their students respectfully, reminding master calligraphers that they have an ethical responsibility to transmit this sacred knowledge and that their blessings and honor derive from having students (Müstakimzâde 2014, 556). Müstakimzâde also advises his contemporaries to respectfully kiss the hands of their masters, for to do so is to follow the guidelines established by the Sunna ("Kissing the hand of the master is of the Sunna. That is to say, kissing the master's hand is [to follow] the Sunna." *Dest-bûs-ı üstâd mesnûndur, ya'ni üstâdn elini öpmek sünnettir.*) (Müstakimzâde 2014, 557). Within the biographical entries themselves, Müstakimzâde frequently praises calligraphers of high moral standing that embody the principles outlined in his *sânihas* and highlights examples of students and calligraphers who were considerate to their respective masters, thus designating these individuals as pious Muslims mindful of Islamic tradition (see, for example, Müstakimzâde 2014, 276). When the two parts of the text are read together, therefore, the *Tuhfe* not only stands as an informative biographical dictionary but also as a didactic and moralizing text that serves as an informative guide for the ethics of calligraphic practice and as a critical study of how to identify and assess ethical value.

When the biographical dictionaries are approached holistically, therefore, and the content of the introductory overtures is taken seriously at both an epistemological and referential level, it becomes clear that the act of prosopography is informed and inflected by the iterant and indisputable engagement with the Qur'ān, prophetic tradition, and narrative. As outlined above, in an attempt to confer legitimacy on the art of calligraphy, authors of the Ottoman biographical dictionaries frequently cited and further narrativized specific Qur'ānic verses that endorsed the scribal arts, imparting holiness to the written text through the designation of calligraphy as a reflection of divine creation and cosmogony, and by ordaining writing as a virtue-based medium for the dissemination of Revelation. Moreover, the authors' repeated hermeneutical engagement with Revelation effectively entered calligraphy into an activity of meaning-making in which the reproduction of calligraphy is conceptualized as a profoundly ethical activity that requires conformity to certain standards of morality. Accordingly, the ethical, intellectual, and theological conception of scribal activity as a respected exemplar of Muslim conduct has a direct bearing on the reading of the biographical entries, in which biography reads unmistakably as hagiography.

4 Conclusion

The preceding overviews of Ottoman prefaces and introductory overtures demonstrate that treatises and biographical dictionaries of Ottoman calligraphy and its practitioners have much in common. In an attempt to confer legitimacy on calligraphy within the authoritative spaces of religious knowledge, Ottoman calligrapher-authors engaged hermeneutically in the narrativization and scriptural exegesis of specific Qur'ānic verses, validating the study of calligraphy as a virtue-based ethical pursuit that conforms to the broader epistemological fabric of religious knowledge, and contributing towards the formation of ethical and moral values. These texts are thus not only linked together by their common participation in pedagogy and prosopography but also by their commitment to look expansively at the diverse forms of meaning that are diffused through engagement with the Qur'ān. To this end, the texts explored in this chapter exemplify a broader mode of "thinking theologically" that transcends the art historical study of calligraphy, challenging the formerly unquestioned imposition of boundaries as constitutive of Islamic calligraphy and encouraging inquiries that go beyond the frame to incorporate a study of ethics, epistemology, and experience.

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An Ethical Reception of Islamic Scripture in Early Modern Europe

Emmanuelle Stefanidis

1 Introduction

To early modern European sensitivities, the Qur'ān was, in Alastair Hamilton's telling metaphor, a "forbidden fruit" (Hamilton 2008). Desired and despised, coveted and feared, the Scripture founding a rival religion and competing political power had attracted European scholarly attention since the Middle Ages. From its early stages, the European reception of the Islamic scripture was marked by ambivalence for, while the Qur'ān was perceived as blatant forgery, it also celebrated Jesus and Mary and called for the worship of one God. It was, furthermore, the founding text of a powerful religion and an admired civilization. Until the twelfth/eighteenth century, when profound intellectual and political changes gradually set the stage for the emergence of a secular framework of analysis, engagements with the Qur'ān were habitually framed by religious polemics. Translations of the Muslim scripture were prefaced with customary denunciations of the "false religion" and a concern for Christian missionary efforts (Ben-Tov 2015, 119–120; Hamilton 2008; Tolan 2018, 198). Such conventional declarations, whether sincere or not, were necessary to avoid censorship, preserve patronage ties, and generally conform to social expectations. They should not, however, conceal the multifaceted interest that the Islamic scripture elicited from European intellectuals. As several recent studies have demonstrated, religious antagonism did not preclude genuine curiosity, scholarly rigor, or an emotional engagement with the Qur'ān (Hamilton 2004, 91–118; 2005, 2008; Burman 2007; Elmarsafy 2009; Ben-Tov 2017; Bevilacqua 2018; Bevilacqua and Loop 2018).

This study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the complex reception of the Qur'ān in early modern Europe through the study of a work that shaped Occidental understandings of Muslim civilizations for two centuries. The *Bibliothèque Orientale* (BO), published in 1697 in Paris, has been described as embodying "the sources of Orientalism" (Laurens 1978), "the most ambitious and wide-ranging European reference work about Islamic topics

that had ever been produced" (Bevilacqua 2018, 109). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said (d. 2003) deemed d'Herbelot's (1625–1695) work to represent the beginnings of European scholarly discourse on Muslim civilization. It was in the *Bibliothèque*, he argued, that "Europe discovered its capacities for encompassing and Orientalizing the Orient" (Said 1978, 64–65). A vast collection of more than 8,000 entries on Muslim culture, history, and religion (Laurens 1978, 37), arranged alphabetically and drawn on dozens of sources in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, the *Bibliothèque* was the life work of one man. Barthélemy d'Herbelot was a member of the French petty nobility who made a name for himself in the Paris of Louis XIV (d. 1715) as a talented savant of Oriental languages and cultures. Little is known about his personal life. According to his obituary, his interest in Oriental languages arose from his desire to understand the Hebrew Bible—perhaps a conventional way of legitimizing a fascination that remained contentious.¹ D'Herbelot traveled to Italy to perfect his linguistic skills. Rome was a major European center of Oriental erudition (Pizzorusso 2010). Piracy and enslavement on both sides of the Mediterranean also offered opportunities for contact and learning. Evidence shows that d'Herbelot studied closely with a Muslim scholar of North African origins, who was held in the prison of Livorno before converting to Catholicism (Tommasino 2018). Whatever his interest in the Bible may originally have been,² d'Herbelot spent the last three decades of his life studying oriental manuscripts with the aim of presenting European readers a panorama of "everything that concerns the knowledge of the People of the Orient," as the full title of his work specifies.³ D'Herbelot died at the age of seventy, two years before the printing

- 1 "Il apprit les Langues Orientales, & s'appliqua principalement à l'Hebraïque, à dessein d'entrer dans l'intelligence du Texte original des Livres de l'ancien Testament." The eulogy, written by Louis Cousin for the *Journal des Sçavans* in 1696, was added to the first edition of the *Bibliothèque Orientale*. Cousin's eulogy is the main source of information on d'Herbelot's life. Charles Perrault's obituary (1700, 71–72) is essentially a paraphrase of Cousin's account. For modern studies of d'Herbelot and his *Bibliothèque Orientale*, see Gaulmier 1969; Laurens 1978; Larzul 2008; Dew 2009; Carnoy-Tourabi 2012; Haddad 2017; Bevilacqua 2016; 2018.
- 2 Nicolas Dew, in his extensive efforts at reconstructing d'Herbelot's scholarly network and patronage, provides evidence of the French scholar's connection with theological *assemblées*, first around the Abbé Bourzeis (1606–1672) and then, led by the eminent bishop Bossuet himself (1627–1704) (Dew 2009, 51–77). We have, unfortunately, no traces of d'Herbelot's contributions to these scholarly circles. I return to Bossuet and his central role in the intellectual life of the period at the end of this study.
- 3 The whole title goes as follows: *Bibliothèque orientale ou dictionnaire universel contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connoissance des Peuples de l'Orient. Leurs histoires et traditions véritables ou fabuleuses; leurs religions, sectes et politique, leurs gouvernements, loix, coûtumes, mœurs, guerres & les révolutions de leurs Empires; leurs sciences et leurs arts, leurs théologie, mythologie, magie, physique, morale, médecine, mathématiques, histoire naturelle,*

of the *Bibliothèque* was completed. After his death, the publication process was supervised by his younger colleague, Antoine Galland (1646–1715), most famous for his adaptation and translation of the tales of *Alf Layla wa-Layla* (“A Thousand and One Nights”) into French. The collaboration between these two scholars of the Orient is particularly noteworthy, for it is through these two works, the *Bibliothèque* and the *Mille et Une Nuits*, that the European intellectual and literary fascination with the Orient crystallizes at the turn of the eighteenth century.⁴

The *Bibliothèque Orientale* comprises more than 8,000 entries covering a wide range of topics related to Islamic civilization based on Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources (Laurens 1978, 47). The longest entries focus on historical figures and dynasties: ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), Hārūn al-Rashīd (d. 193/809), Tīmūr (Tamerlane, d. 807/1405), “Nouschirvan” (i.e., Anushirvan or Khusruw I, d. 579 CE), etc. Many more entries simply list literary works and their authors.⁵ Others offer geographical details of towns, regions, and mountains or introduce cultural practices and techniques.⁶ A few, mostly long and elaborate, address religious beliefs and representations: “Gennah” (Ar. *janna*), “Gehennam,” “Afu” (Ar. *ʿafw*, divine forgiveness), etc.⁷ The twin entries on the Qur’ān (“Alcoran,” d’Herbelot 1697, 85–88) and Muḥammad (“Mohammed Aboulkassem Ben A’bdallah,” d’Herbelot 1697, 598–603) display a conventional hostile tone. The Qur’ān is a “detestable Book,” a “pack of crude falsehoods” (*un tissu d’impostures fort grossières*, d’Herbelot 1697, 599) assembled by “that famous impostor.” Reflecting both longstanding hostilities and emerging

chronologie, géographie, observations astronomiques, grammaire et rhétorique; les vies et actions remarquables de tous leurs saints, docteurs, philosophes, historiens, poètes, capitaines, et de tous ceux qui se sont rendus illustres parmi eux, par leur vertu et par leur savoir; des jugements critiques, et des extraits de tous leurs ouvrages, de leurs traités, traductions, commentaires, abreges, recueils de fables, de sentences, de maximes, de proverbes, de contes, de bons mots, et de tous leurs livres écrits en Arabe, en Persan, ou en Turc, sur toutes sortes de sciences, d’arts et de professions.

- 4 There is, however, no indication that Galland participated in the writing of the original entries of the BO (Laurens 1978, 25; Abdel-Halim 1964, 86).
- 5 These entries draw extensively on the famous bibliographical catalog of the Ottoman author Ḥajjī Khalifa (d. 1067/1657), *Kashf al-Zunūn* (“The Removal of Doubt”). The debt is acknowledged in the preface by Galland who states that Ḥajjī Khalifa’s catalogue is “inserted here almost in its totality.”
- 6 See, for example, the entry on “Abriz” (Ar. *ibrīz*) meaning “pure gold” (d’Herbelot 1697, 17), “Cahuah” (Ar. *qahwa*), coffee (d’Herbelot 1697, 42), “Louk” (Ar. *lakk*), meaning natural lacquer used in the composition of certain colors (d’Herbelot 1697, 522).
- 7 Laurens (1978, 37–47) has provided a detailed analysis of the topics covered in the BO, which he divides into eight categories: 1. Bibliographical entries (by title), 2. Bibliographical entries (by author), 3. Culture, 4. Linguistics, 5. Civilisation, 6. Religion, 7. History, 8. Geography.

Enlightenment biases, the French scholar scoffs at the exaggerated “fables” and “superstitions” in which Muslims and particularly *Alcoranistes*—*gens attachés à la lettre de l’Alcoran* (d’Herbelot 1697, 87)—believe. Nevertheless, when it comes to presenting the Qur’ānic stories of prophets and other narratives, d’Herbelot’s appreciation of the various accounts recorded in the Muslim Scripture becomes apparent. The entries on figures such as Adam, Nuh al-Nabi (Nūḥ), Abraham (or Ebrahim), Jousouf ben Jacob (Yūsuf), Moussa ben Amran (Mūsā), Issa and his mother Miriam are among the longest of the encyclopedia. Adopting an insider’s perspective (exemplified by the use of the Arabic form of the prophets’ names), d’Herbelot not only faithfully preserves the ethical dimension of the narratives but also often reinforces it by adducing Muslim mystical or philosophical interpretations.

The status of Qur’ānic accounts in the *Bibliothèque* is the subject of this study. I argue that d’Herbelot displays a receptivity to the ethical and spiritual potential of the prophetic narratives as told in the Muslim tradition. His reference to the “heretical” nature of the Qur’ān, which (unoriginally) he sees as a forged scripture concocted by Muḥammad with bits and pieces of the biblical heritage, did not prevent him from finding spiritual inspiration and nourishment in the Muslim religious imaginary. How, to what extent, and under what conditions was d’Herbelot able to draw ethico-spiritual guidance from a rival scripture? What role did narratives play for him and his readers in forming a novel gaze on the Qur’ānic message? How can we best situate the BO’s representation of Qur’ānic heritage within the tradition of Christian polemics?

The chapter starts with a brief presentation of the literary context to which d’Herbelot belonged. The Grand Siècle’s fondness for edifying storytelling and, notably, tales from the East provides an important backdrop to the ethical reception of the Qur’ān. Appreciation for “oriental” narrative creativity as well as “curiosity,” a highly esteemed courtly value, meant stories drawn from the Qur’ān could be read as literary artifacts and not solely as religious objects. The second part of this chapter summarizes BO entries on major contested figures such as Adam, Jesus, Mary, and Abraham. It gives an overview of the reshaping of older polemical trends by new literary, historical, and confessional concerns that arose in the seventeenth century. The third section consists of a close reading of a specific entry on the prophet Hūd. By comparing d’Herbelot’s retelling of the story of Hūd with his Arabic and Persian sources, I examine the French scholar’s editorial and literary choices. I show that d’Herbelot’s depiction combines polemical statements with an appreciation of the universal meaning of the Qur’ān and empathy with Islamic expressions of mysticism. A final section examines further the intersection, in the *Bibliothèque*, between narratives and spirituality. D’Herbelot’s sensitivity to the edifying scope of the Islamic

Scripture and religious tradition, beyond a predictable formal hostility, is facilitated by the mystical lens that the French scholar adopts. By invoking a *théologie mystique* that transcends conventional religious boundaries, d'Herbelot allows for a narrow but effective release of Islam from Christian polemical reflexes. This section ends with some remarks on d'Herbelot's understanding of mysticism in the turbulent context of the French Catholic Revival.

Previous analyses of the tensions running through d'Herbelot's work have highlighted the continuity between his painting of Islam and earlier polemical engagements. As far as the strictly religious dimension of Islamic civilization is concerned, these authors contend, d'Herbelot remains indebted to traditionally hostile framings of Islam (Laurens 1978, 71–78; Gunny 1996, 47–54; Haddad 2017, 612–617). While recognizing the ambivalence that characterizes the *Bibliothèque*, I present d'Herbelot's work as an early European attempt to look at the Qur'ān and the Islamic tradition as legitimate vehicles of spirituality and right conduct.

2 “Oriental” Fables

A cursory reading of d'Herbelot's massive opus reveals the central function played by narratives. Qur'ānic stories and prophetic tales form but a fraction of the narrative storehouse of the BO. Long entries on historical figures similarly collate a series of vivid biographical vignettes, ranging from entertaining to edifying. Thus, in the entry on the caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 158/775), we learn of his bravery in battle and generosity in dealing with an inopportune courtier. The long entry on Timur, after detailing his rise to power, battle after battle, proceeds with four pages of varied anecdotes illustrating the Turco-Mongol's warrior character, humor, and humanity. The variety, exoticism, and liveliness of the narrations found in d'Herbelot's work explain, to a large extent, the wide appeal of the BO, an otherwise dense and erudite work packed with foreign names and exotic words. Voltaire (d. 1778), who drew extensively on the *Bibliothèque* for his *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756), would describe the book as “The Arab and Tartar tales that go by the name of the *Bibliothèque Orientale*” (private correspondence cited by Dew 2009, 169). Nicolas Dew aptly remarks that Voltaire's comment suggests an affinity with Galland's translation of *A Thousand and One Nights*, “as if the [BO] was to be read as an Arabian Nights in dictionary form.” The BO was published—with the help of the same Galland—seven years before the first volume of the highly popular collections of Arabian tales came out. The immediate success of Galland's volume, which was joined by eleven others (1704–1717), set the eighteenth-century literary

captivation with the Orient in motion. Authors soon followed the trend by publishing collections of tales with similar titles, such as Pétis de la Croix's *A Thousand and One Days* (1710–1712).⁸

While the *Arabian Nights* marks the beginning of the oriental vogue that would charm European elites, the idea of a privileged relationship between storytelling and the Orient precedes Galland's publication. "Orientals" were simply better at telling good stories; the very invention of novels and stories is ascribed to them.⁹ This supposed ability was eyed with ambivalence, for only a civilization incapable of reason would indulge in such states of heightened imagination. The prominence of fables—that is, *l'art de mentir agréablement* (Huet 1670, 13)—was a sign of archaic thinking. Furthermore, as one orientalist put it, fabulation was the natural consequence of despotic governments; subjects, unable to freely express themselves to the king, were compelled to develop a literary subterfuge (Gaulmin 1644). Yet, oriental stories were pleasing and entertaining and often abounded in wisdom. In 1634, the diplomat André Du Ryer introduced European audiences to a masterful Persian work of moral storytelling, Sa'dī's (d. 691/1292) *Gulistān* ("Rose Garden"). The Persian text was already well-known and much sought after by collectors and specialists.¹⁰ Du Ryer made it accessible to a wider audience through a concise and easily readable French translation. Ten years later, Gilbert Gaulmin published a translation of a Persian version of the tales of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*.¹¹ The two translations appear to have had limited immediate success, but their discovery by

8 On François Pétis de la Croix (1653–1713), a respected scholar of Oriental languages, and his five-volume collection of Persian tales, see Franz Hahn 2002. In France, collections of tales with titles inspired by the Arabian nights include Tartar tales (*Les Mille et un quarts d'heure*, 1733), Peruvian tales (*Les Mille et une heures*, 1740), Gaulish tales (*Les Mille et une faveurs*, 1760), and French tales (*Les Mille et une folies*, 1771) (see Zakaria 2004). The love of tales also owes much to Charles Perrault's *Les contes du temps passé*, published in 1697, the same year as the BO (Hahn 2002, 15–53; Reynolds 2006, 279–280). On the foundational role of the *Mille et une nuits*, one may refer to the article by Madeleine Dobie (2008) and the references therein.

9 The oriental origin of fiction was first stated by Pierre-Daniel Huet in his *Traité de l'origine des romans* (1670, 10), which he wrote as a preface to the novel of his friend Mme de La Fayette, *Zayde*. Thereafter, asserting a link between the Orient and storytelling became commonplace in early modern France (Corradi 2019).

10 For an in-depth analysis of the reception of the *Gulistān* in Europe, see Babinski 2019.

11 *Le Livre des lumières ou la conduite des roys composé par le sage Pilpay indien traduit en françois par David Sahid d'Ispahan* (1644) is a translation of Ḥusayn Wā'iz al-Kāshifī's (d. 910/1504) *Amvār-i Suhaylī* ("Lights of Canopus"). David Sahid of Isfahan has mistakenly been understood to be Gaulmin's pseudonym (see Dandray 2017, 122). It was, in fact, the name of his assistant, Dāvūd bin Sayyid Iṣfahānī, a Christian originally from Isfahan (Babinski 2019, 269).

the most famous fabulist of the century ensured the dissemination of their "Oriental" wisdom.

Indeed, after an encounter with Du Ryer and Gaulmin's translations, Jean de La Fontaine (d. 1695) was inspired to compose another set of moral fables (1678–1679) following the enormous success enjoyed by his first volume. In the preface to this second volume, La Fontaine singles out Pilpay as his new source, on a par with the Greek Aesop who inspired his first volume; unless he adds, that Pilpay is himself, Aesop, also "known under the name of the sage Locman" (cited in Dandrey 2017, 121).¹² The seventeenth-century identification of the mythical Aesop with the oriental (indeed, Qur'ānic) wise man Luqmān epitomizes the association, in European eyes, between wisdom, storytelling, and the East. D'Herbelot, too, rehearses this imagined connection and what it may reveal of the cultural origins of fables. The entry on "Locman Al Hakim," after reporting numerous anecdotes of his life, considers the possibility that he was Aesop, for both are said to be from Ethiopia and remembered for their "parables, proverbs, and apologues" (d'Herbelot 1697, 517). This may only be a conjecture, d'Herbelot continues, but it is certain that "the manner of instruction through fables is more in line with the genius of the Orientals than that of the peoples of the Occident."

The *Bibliothèque Orientale* must then be situated in the same intellectual circles of late seventeenth-century France, which appreciated the wisdom of the *Gulistān* and Pilpay's tales, applauded La Fontaine's *Fables*, and would, a few decades later, relish the exoticism of Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et Une Nuits*. These circles were fashioned by the socio-cultural courtly ideal of the *honnête homme*, which weaves together knowledge and pleasure, curiosity and novelty, edification and storytelling.¹³ Galland's introduction to the *Bibliothèque*, written soon after the death of the author, eloquently reflects how knowing the foreign yields both "satisfaction" and "utility" (d'Herbelot 1776, xiii):

Nothing in the world is more pleasurable than to have learned what we did not know ... [W]hat is pleasing, particularly to the mind, is also at the same time useful. Can one uphold that it is useless to get to know what so many excellent writers have thought, what they wrote regarding their religion, their histories, their countries, their customs, their

12 Dandrey (2017, 125–127) identifies at least one fable as deriving from Du Ryer's translation of the *Gulistān* and about twenty from *Le livre des lumières* (see also Bassan 1970).

13 On the culture of *honnêteté*, Emmanuel Bury's classic work (1996) remains central; more recent references can be found in Dotoli (2019). On curiosity for the Orient in the Grand siècle and its role in the *honnêteté* sociability, see Dew 2009, 81–130; Kenny 2004, 160–286.

laws, the virtues they adhere to, the vices they detest; and, thus, does one not acquire without trouble and without leaving one's home, what we should get from them by traveling, *to perfect's one character and become an accomplished man*, a man who judges all things wisely, who speaks of them correspondingly, and who confirms his actions to his thoughts and to his words, which one only does in proportion to the knowledge acquired not only from what happens under the horizon where we breathe but from the whole universe?¹⁴

While oriental wisdom, dressed in fables, was attractive to European seventeenth-century taste, it also raised the problem of transferability: how do tales travel from one culture to another? How are religious elements presented and received at times discordant with the target culture? In 1634, Du Ryer's solution to this problem was to truncate from his translation whatever may "give offense to religion" (Du Ryer 1634, dedication).¹⁵ His *Gulistan* is minimally Islamic, the minaret at times becoming a tower bell (Brancaforte 2017, 455–457). Gaulmin's *Livre des Lumières*, while taken from a ninth/fifteenth-century Persian author, did not present the same challenge. Its narrative frame is set in a time and space (ancient India) that did not pose a strong theological threat to Christianity. D'Herbelot, on the other hand, by presenting Muslim accounts of Biblical prophets, treads upon delicate terrain. Galland is aware of the tension such an enterprise may cause. He attempts to pre-empt criticism by invoking, again, the joy of discovery: "Whether their traditions are false or whether they are truthful, it is always very pleasing to know them" (d'Herbelot 1776, viii). Stories and dictums possess an ability to cross the religious divide, which dogmas do not. "Mahomet's perverse doctrine" has caused much damage to Christianity, Galland admits, but entertaining tales, marvelous stories, moral

14 My italics. All translations from the BO are mine. Since the 1697 edition provides no page number for Galland's preface, quotations from that preface use the pagination of the 1776 Maastricht edition of the BO. The 1776 edition is a reprint of the original 1697 edition with a slightly simplified alphabetical order of the entries. All other references to the BO are to the original 1697 edition.

15 Interestingly, it is the same Du Ryer who, a few years later (1647), produced the first translation of the Qur'ān from Arabic into a vernacular language (French). From wanting to avoid the religious dimension of the "Orient", he went on to translate the Muslim scripture. Du Ryer's puzzling evolution is less surprising if, as Hamilton has argued, we take into account that his translation was not, at its core, religiously motivated but a literary project, as the *Gulistan* has been. Du Ryer wanted to introduce European readership to the Qur'ān as "a work of literature and entertainment" (Hamilton 2008, 4–6). Like the *Gulistan*, his *Alcoran* was published by Antoine de Sommaville, who was a prominent literary publisher.

fables, maxims, and proverbs from the Orient will be a source of wonder and a cause for reflection for readers whose taste is not deprived.¹⁶

3 Sacred History in the *Bibliothèque*

The *Bibliothèque* provides more than thirty entries on Qur'ānic figures, in a total of around seventy pages.¹⁷ The alphabetical structure of the BO results in some narratives being told over different entries in a fragmented fashion which, to a small extent, may be likened to that of the Qur'ān. Important details of the story of Mūsā, for example, are provided in the entries on “Feraoun” (Fir'awn) and “Sho'ayb” (considered to be Jethro, Moses' father-in-law). Qur'ānic narratives are presented and fleshed out in the manner of the popular genre of the “tales of the prophets” (*qışaş al-anbiyā'*): Qur'ānic and extra-Qur'ānic elements are woven together into an integral, fluid narrative. Some entries, such as that on “Houd” presented below, report a single dramatic story, but longer entries on major prophets (Adam, Abraham, Moses ...) juxtapose different episodes, some of them, such as the birth and childhood of Abraham, devoid of any Qur'ānic references. When citations of the Qur'ān do appear, they usually consist of the protagonists' direct speech, are few, and are outweighed by the narrative plot. D'Herbelot is not primarily interested in how the Qur'ān depicts a specific prophet or in the particular way it recounts episodes of his life. What attracts the French scholar's attention, rather, is the storytelling tradition of Muslim authors. D'Herbelot intends to share the original structure of the tale and a selection of the details that Muslim authors deemed important. In other words, he is offering his readership a “mattering map” to use Martha Montello's evocative expression (2014, 4) of the religious narrative imagination of the Islamic tradition. A conscientious approach to Muslim sources is characteristic of the BO, which is, to a large extent, a work of linguistic and cultural translation. It is telling, in this regard, that d'Herbelot intentionally refrained

16 “La doctrine perverse de Mahomet, qui a causé de si grands dommages au Christianisme est suivie depuis tant de siècles par ce nombre prodigieux de Sectateurs” (d'Herbelot 1776, x). “Les Savants et toutes sortes de personnes qui n'auront pas le gout dépravé, admireront, sans doute, cette quantité prodigieuse d'ouvrages.... Livres de Fables morales, de Collections, de Proverbes, de Sentences ou Maximes, de paroles remarquables et de bons mots, de Contes divertissants, & d'Histoires fabuleuses que nous appellons Romans” (d'Herbelot 1776, xiii).

17 The entries on Qur'ānic figures and narratives are listed in the appendix.

from referring to the critical work of fellow European scholars.¹⁸ His extensive reliance on oriental sources is both “pragmatic and sincere” (Bevilacqua 2016, 225). While d’Herbelot’s general methodology is to let Orientals speak uninterrupted, religious topics constitute, as Bevilacqua notes, the primary site for the scholar’s insertion of “editorial comments.” The Prophet is typically qualified as “false” or “impostor”—a reverse expression of the pious formulas accompanying his name in Muslim writings and a conventional qualifier in Christian polemics. However, that apart, hostile statements remain an exception. Most entries, including those on religious matters, adopt an insider’s perspective, at times reproducing conventional Islamic phrases such as “God says” (*Coulho Taala*) to introduce direct divine speech in the Qur’ān (*inter alia*, d’Herbelot 1697, 87, 50, 287).

Qur’ānic accounts that diverge from their biblical counterparts are, at times, denounced. But d’Herbelot’s polemical voice is uneven, even within the frame of a single entry. The article on Mary, for example, starts by underlining the commonalities between Christian and Muslim beliefs until Mary’s childhood under Zachariah’s care is addressed. Here, d’Herbelot makes a clear judgment on where the truth lies. Muḥammad’s custom, he writes, “is to always inflate the stories of the Ancient and New Testament by adding circumstances which the Scriptures do not mention, thus often corrupting the truth of the sacred text” (d’Herbelot 1697, 589).¹⁹ The entry on Jesus, “Issa,” focuses on the points of agreement between the Muslim and Christian perspectives and carefully avoids anti-Islamic statements. Such a conciliatory tone is not unprecedented. Early on, Christian missionaries had realized that the Qur’ānic portrait of Jesus, as “the word of God” (*kalimatuhu*) and a “spirit” from him (*rūḥ^{un} minhu*), could be used in their favor (Kritzeck 1962, 394).²⁰ The narrative of Adam’s creation and fall, told over two entries (“Adam,” “Eblis”), is reported with colorful details and not once compared to the Biblical version. D’Herbelot’s non-judgemental, even appreciative reading of Adam’s story contrasts with the anonymous annotator’s comment on Robert of Ketton’s (d. 1160) Latin translation (ca. 1140). He wrote: “an extremely stupid fable—I do not know where he

18 On d’Herbelot’s choice not to refer to other European scholars, see Galland’s observations in his preface to the BO (d’Herbelot 1776, xvii).

19 Elsewhere, in the entry on Zachariah, d’Herbelot scorns again at Qur’ānic “absurdities.” In this case, he means the confusion of Marie the sister of Aaron with Marie the mother of Jesus, and that of Zachariah the prophet with Zachariah the father of John the Baptist (d’Herbelot 1697, 922).

20 In d’Herbelot’s time, Michel Nau’s (d. 1683) missionary handbook subtitled *La vérité de la religion chrétienne défendue & prouvée contre l’Alcoran, par l’Alcoran même* (1684) followed a similar approach.

[Muḥammad] found it" (cited in Burman 2007, 102).²¹ The extensive entry on Abraham contains several anecdotes, some of which are Qur'ānic while others are traditional. D'Herbelot appears to particularly enjoy a long and eventful "fable" on the birth and childhood of the biblical patriarch. When, however, he comes to discussing the respective status of Abraham and Muḥammad, he lambasts the "impious and ridiculous exaggerations of the Muslims." Yet, in the same entry, we also find a bold suggestion. D'Herbelot considers that European chronologists, who have struggled to reconcile different passages of the Bible on the chronology of Abraham's life, could benefit from the Qur'ānic genealogy of Abraham as the son of Āzar (Q 6:74), thus inserting a generation between Abraham and Terah, his father according to the Bible. Here, timidly yet explicitly, d'Herbelot indicates that the Muslim scripture may, at times, inform Biblical scholarship.

The possibility that the Qur'ān may contain authentic religious knowledge draws on long-standing Christian characterizations of the Qur'ān as a patchwork of canonical and apocryphal Biblical material gathered by Muḥammad from Christian heretics and ill-intentioned Jews ("Alcoran," d'Herbelot 1697, 88). In the emerging critical spirit of the seventeenth century, this understanding allows d'Herbelot to deploy Islam's foundational text as a historical document. The Qur'ān and the early commentaries, even if despised theologically, could be valued for preserving Christian (and Jewish) traditions which would "perhaps have been lost otherwise" ("Miriam," d'Herbelot 1697, 588). The recovery of early Christian beliefs wasn't purely of historical interest. In the confessional disputes that marred Europe since the reformation, determining early Christian worship and creed was of central importance. The status of Mary, in particular, generated intense debates. In this regard, a saying attributed to Muḥammad (a Prophetic *ḥadīth*), which appeared to support the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, was often cited by Catholics to prove that the doctrine was not a late Roman invention but dated back to the first centuries (Gay-Canton 2010). It is the content of this *ḥadīth* that d'Herbelot reports in the entry on "Miriam" as one of those traditions that would be lost were it not for the Qur'ān.²²

21 The comment is found on the manuscript (Robert of Ketton 1142–1143, f. 26r) as an anonymous annotation next to the translation of Q 2:30–38 which recounts the creation of Adam, the divine command to the angels to prostrate themselves, the teaching of the "names" to Adam and Iblis' disobedience.

22 D'Herbelot was not the first to view the Qur'ān as a piece of evidence of early eastern Christianity. In his *Historia Orientalis* (1651), the Swiss Protestant theologian and orientalist Johann Hottinger, had similarly resorted to the Qur'ān as a historical document, this time to support Protestant positions (Loop 2013, 192–202; see also Ben-Tov 2017, 75). For a

While Qur'ānic statements may pose a theological difficulty because of their revelatory claim, narrative appendices developed by the exegetical tradition could be enjoyed more freely. D'Herbelot appears to appreciate the commentators' capacity "to fill with their glosses the great gaps that are found in the stories that Mahomet reports only through detached scraps" (*par lambeaux détachés*, "Loth," d'Herbelot 1697, 521). The famed storytelling creativity of the Orient produced fine tales, entertaining as well as edifying. D'Herbelot aims to convey their meaning by closely adhering to his sources. Having clarified that these stories are "fables" "added to the truth of story [or history]" (*ajoutees à la vérité de l'histoire*, "Loth," d'Herbelot 1697, 521), he can proceed with a translation uninterrupted by polemical remarks. Literary truth is what is at stake here, not theological or historical veracity.

The entry on Abraha offers a good example of d'Herbelot's respect for the moral world of the stories he reports. Abraha, the Abyssinian governor of Yemen, was said to have marched towards Mecca on the back of an elephant the year Muḥammad was born. His military expedition is well-known for providing the backdrop to Q 105 (*sūrat al-Fīl*, The Elephant). D'Herbelot's narration starts as the neutral report of a distant dispute. The reader is told of the governor's plan to build a majestic church that would detract Arabs from visiting the Ka'ba. One day, a group from Mecca mischievously defiled the newly built cathedral, and Abraha, mad with anger, resolved to destroy the Meccan temple. At this point, the distinctly Muslim point of view of d'Herbelot's sources becomes apparent. Indifferent to the fact that Abraha was a Christian defending the sanctity of a church, the narration rejoices at the divine will to protect the Ka'ba, "a temple built by the prophet Abraham" himself. As Abraha's threatening army and his awe-inspiring elephants encircled Mecca, "Heaven" (*le Ciel*) intervened. A cloud of birds descended, each carrying a stone in its beak. The birds bombarded Abraha's army, which was annihilated. Abraha himself escaped, continues d'Herbelot, but "one of these birds executing Heaven's revenge" chased the Abyssinian throughout the land, for "divine justice" demanded that he should die a "memorable death" for his crime.²³ The story ends with a theatrical description of Abraha dying at the feet of his

study of the intimate connection between scriptural scholarship, historical criticism, and confessional debates in the seventeenth century, see Hardy 2017.

- 23 "Abraha, après avoir vu son armée périr par un si étrange accident, repassa la mer, & alla trouver le Negiashi pour luy faire sçavoir son desastre: mais la Justice divine qui vouloit laisser un exemple memorable de la punition de ceux qui avoient osé entreprendre la ruine d'un Temple bâti par Abraham, ne quitta pas ce malheureux Prince d'un seul pas; car un de ces oiseaux executeurs de la vengeance du Ciel, le suivit dans toute sa route avec sa pierre au bec" ("Abraha," d'Herbelot 1697, 12).

king, the Negus. By embracing an Islamic perspective, d'Herbelot presents the reader with a compelling story and a coherent Muslim moral universe.

4 D'Herbelot's Retelling of the Story of Hūd

D'Herbelot's reliance on accepted humanist practices (translation, compilation, encyclopedism) allows him to minimize the polemical apparatus that usually framed the knowledge of Islam. This, however, raises a central methodological question: if d'Herbelot's role is essentially that of a translator and compiler, to what extent can we access his own appreciation of the Qur'ānic stories? While the narrative voice is not his but that of his sources, his editorial choices indicate that he considered many of these stories to be meaningful. D'Herbelot's retelling of the story of Hūd is informative in this regard. Comparing the BO's account with its Arabic and Persian sources reveals significant narrative adjustments to make the moral of the story accessible to a European audience.

The BO entry on "Houd" provides a well-formed narrative of the disobedience and ensuing trials of the people of 'Ād, ending with their destruction by the blowing of *ṣarṣar*, a violent and cold wind for a duration of seven nights and seven [*sic*] days (cf. Q 69:6–7).²⁴ The account starts with 'Ād suffering a three-year-long drought as divine punishment for their rejection of Hūd's mission. The people of 'Ād, formerly the greatest of all Arabian tribes, agonize in terrible misery, finding their false idols to be of no help. They resolved to send a delegation to the Ḥijāz, "where Mecca is presently situated," and where it was believed that God was answering petitions. Two men headed the delegation, one of whom, "Morthad" (Marthad), had secretly accepted the message of Hūd. When they arrived, Marthad admonished his fellow leader "Kil" (Qayl), pointing out that there was no point asking God anything if they were rejecting Hūd's call and persisting in their unbelief (d'Herbelot 1697, 469),

For, he told them, how do you wish for God to pour out the abundant rain of mercy on us if we refuse to listen to the voice of the one he sent to instruct us?

On hearing these words, Qayl, who was "most obstinate in his error," prevented Marthad from accompanying the delegation to the place of the petition. Once there, and having asked God for rain for his people, Qayl was presented with

²⁴ Q 69:6–7 mentions seven nights and eight days.

three clouds—red, white, and black—while a heavenly voice asked him to choose one. Qayl confidently selected the black cloud, which he believed to be the most promising, and returned to his people boasting of his achievement. The black cloud, however, was not full of water but of God's revenge (*la vengeance divine*) by which all the people of 'Ād, except Hūd and his followers, died. D'Herbelot closes the narrative with what he presents as a verse from *sūrat* Hūd (Q 7:72):²⁵

Nous avons delivré Houd & tous les siens par nôtre misericorde, & nous avons exterminé entierement ceux qui ont meprisé nos signes, & qui sont demeurez dans l'infidélité.

D'HERBELOT 1697, 460

D'Herbelot tells the narrative of 'Ād's destruction on the authority of three late Persian works: the "Tarikh Montekheb," also called by its Persian title "Tarikh Khozideh" (eighth/fourteenth century);²⁶ "Khondemir" (ninth–tenth/fifteenth–sixteenth century);²⁷ and the popular *Tafsīr* ("Exegesis") of "Houssayn Vaez" (ninth/fifteenth century).²⁸ He habitually cites these sources for all Qur'ān-related narratives, and he notes that they typically concur (d'Herbelot 1697, 460). However, in this case, these three works give too concise an account of the destruction of the 'Ād to be d'Herbelot's only sources: they focus exclusively on the tragic irony of the leader of 'Ād unknowingly choosing

25 "We saved him, and those who were with him, through Our mercy; We destroyed those who denied Our revelations and would not believe." I follow Abdel Haleem's translation of the Qur'ān (2004).

26 *Tārīkh-i Guzīda* ("Selected History"): a history from creation until the author's time, written by Ḥamd Allāh al-Mustawfī al-Qazwīnī (d. 750/1349–1350). See the entry "Tarikh Khozideh" in BO (d'Herbelot 1697, 868–869).

27 Khwāndamīr (ca. 1475–1535): Persian historian, author of *Khulāṣat al-Akhbār* ("Summary of the Reports"). See entry "Khondemir" in BO (d'Herbelot 1697, 994). A full edition of the Khwāndamīr's *Khulāṣat al-Akhbār* has not yet been published. For the purpose of this chapter, I am referring to a digitized copy of a manuscript kept at the National Library in Tehran, available at <http://dl.nlai.ir/UI/dee40921-of2f-417f-92a6-81a2f6b1288e/LRRView.aspx>. The story of Hūd can be found on pages 37–39 of that online copy.

28 Ḥusayn Wā'iz al-Kāshifī (d. 1504), a Persian polymath and exegete, author of *Mawāhib-i 'Alīyya* ("Lofty Gifts"), also known as *Tafsīr-i Ḥusaynī* ("Ḥusayn's Tafsīr"), a commentary which includes a Persian paraphrase, mystical interpretations, poetry and tales (Sands 2003). See the entry in BO on "Vae'dh" (d'Herbelot 1697, 904). Al-Kāshifī is also the compiler of the Persian collection of Pilpay's tales which Gaulmin translated in 1644. D'Herbelot's copy of this *tafsīr* is held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris, BNF Supplément persan 54), accessible online at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10099882s/f8.item.zoom>. References are to this manuscript.

the cloud that will annihilate his people and, most tellingly, the central character of Marthad is either omitted (al-Qazwīnī 1910, 28–29; Khwāndamīr n.d., 37–39; Kāshifī n.d., 411–413) or is barely mentioned (Kāshifī n.d., 279–281).

Marthad's role in the story of 'Ād's destruction is well-known, however, from the account given by Ibn Ishāq, the author of the famous *Sīra* ("Biography") of the Prophet. In its original form, Ibn Ishāq's (d. ca. 151/768) *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* ("The Biography of the Messenger of God") contained a *Kitāb al-Mubtada'* ("Book of Beginnings"), which chronicled the lives of the prophets.²⁹ Though the *Kitāb al-Mubtada'* has for long been lost, Ibn Ishāq's account of Hūd and the fate of 'Ād has been transmitted, among others, by al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) in his *Tārīkh* ("History") and al-Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) in his *Arā'is al-Majālis fī Qīṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'* ("Tales of the Prophets"), also known as *Nafā'is al-'Arā'is*. D'Herbelot must have had access to both these texts, as he refers to and quotes from them in numerous locations in the BO.³⁰ A comparison between d'Herbelot's account and that attributed to Ibn Ishāq reveals important narrative elements that d'Herbelot chose to omit.³¹

Both al-Ṭabarī's and al-Tha'labī's accounts recount how the 'Ād delegation shamelessly enjoyed lavish hospitality nearby Mecca for the duration of a whole month "while their people at home were perishing of distress and thirst."³² Their host, a certain Mu'āwiya who is also their relative, attempts to remind them of their mission. Too embarrassed to contravene the laws of hospitality, Mu'āwiya confides in his two slave girls. They, in turn, cleverly suggest that he address his guests indirectly via poetry. The host composes an emotional and lambasting poem which the two singers then recite to the 'Ād envoys anonymously. The message is immediately received, and the delegation, with Qayl at its head, proceeds to petition God. The rest of the account is found in

29 For an attempted reconstruction of this lost work, see Newby 1989.

30 D'Herbelot mentions al-Tha'labī in numerous locations in the BO and explicitly refers to his *Nafā'is al-'Arā'is* (d'Herbelot 1697, 54). Al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* is mentioned equally often and d'Herbelot devotes two relatively long entries to the author (d'Herbelot 1697, 1014) and his work (d'Herbelot 1697, 866). A Persian translation of the first volume of the *Tārīkh*, which belonged to d'Herbelot, is kept at the BNF (MS Supplément persan 164).

31 I give precedence to al-Tha'labī's version of Ibn Ishāq's account because the structure of the BO entry more closely reflects that of the *Arā'is al-Majālis* but I refer when necessary to al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*. Indeed, d'Herbelot precedes the account of 'Ād's destruction with an indication of their geographical location and an explanation of the Qur'ānic term *aḥqāf* (sand dunes) which follows closely al-Tha'labī's expression (n.d., 66). This detail is not transmitted by al-Ṭabarī in the *Tārīkh* section on Hūd, though elements of it can be found in a preceding section (al-Ṭabarī 1967, 1:204). It is also not found in the three Persian sources named by d'Herbelot.

32 "وقد هلك مَنْ وراءهم من قومه جهداً وعطشاً" (d'Herbelot 1697, 67; cf. al-Ṭabarī 1967, 1:220).

the *Bibliothèque*: Qayl gladly chooses the black cloud, which, ironically, brings doom to his people (al-Thaʿlabī n.d., 67). The hospitality anecdote in Thaʿlabī's account is central for two reasons. First, it highlights the extent of the moral degeneration of the notables of ʿĀd, who enjoy themselves, eat, and drink while their families are dying. Secondly, it provides an element of entertainment to the reader (or hearer), who can identify with Muʿāwiya's predicament and rejoice at his clever trick. D'Herbelot's account retains a trace of the hospitality episode, but it is summarized with a laconic [*ils*] *furent très-bien recus* ("they were very well received") (d'Herbelot 1697, 461). Rather, d'Herbelot's retelling of the story centers on the wise words of Marthad—quoted above—which are highlighted by the fact that they are reported in direct speech. Consequently, the narrative structure followed by d'Herbelot, much in accord with Qurʾānic discourse, underscores the irony of a people who refuse to worship God in normal circumstances but come to him for help in desperate times. The Hūd narrative, as told in the BO, transcends the specific case of a morally degenerate people to, more generally, point out the hypocrisy and inconsistency of human beings.

5 Mysticism in the *Bibliothèque*

D'Herbelot's receptivity to the wisdom in Hūd's story is consistent with his interest in spiritual and theocentric motifs, such as surrendering to God, purity of heart, and self-sacrifice. The prevalence of "mysticism" in the BO has been noted before (Carnoy-Tourabi 2012, Haddad 2017) but has not yet been the object of a detailed study.³³ D'Herbelot's portrait of Islam as a fountain of mysticism and moral truths sits awkwardly with the more conventionally hostile statements he makes regarding Muḥammad and his legacy. To explain this tension in d'Herbelot's work, it has been suggested that the scholar was relaying Sufi interpretations in order to expose the absurdity of orthodox, literal Islam: "Selecting citations that are mystical or theosophical in nature, d'Herbelot sees an opportunity to poke holes in the Islamic faith" (Haddad 2017, 617; see also Gunny 1996, 47). Such an explanation is not entirely convincing. D'Herbelot rarely opposes mystics to orthodox scholars. Rather, he considers both groups

33 While the term *mysticism* is a nineteenth-century neologism that does not appear in the BO, d'Herbelot uses the term *mystique*, as an adjective and noun. I employ the term here in the sense of "a belief that union with or absorption into the Deity ... may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender" (Oxford English dictionary definition). D'Herbelot's expression *Théologie mystique* comes very close to that meaning (see below).

to be in agreement regarding the essence of Islam, defined as “the complete submission and resignation of body and soul to God and to what Mahomet revealed on his behalf” (“Esla'm,” d'Herbelot 1697, 325–326).³⁴ A thorough examination of d'Herbelot's treatment of Islamic mysticism remains beyond the scope of this chapter. My focus here is on the intersection between stories and mysticism. Through examples taken from the entries on Hūd, Abraham, Adam, Pharaoh, Joseph, and Lot, I show how narrative motifs in the BO often become pretexts for mystical contemplation.

In the latter part of the entry on Hūd, the narrative of 'Ād's destruction gives way to a meditation on the necessity to abandon oneself to God. The topic is introduced by a Qur'ānic verse containing Hūd's exclamation to his people (Q 11:56),³⁵ which d'Herbelot translates (somewhat freely) as:

J'ay mis toute ma confiance en Dieu, qui est mon Seigneur & le vôtre; car il n'y a aucune creature sur terre qu'il ne tienne entre ses mains par la touffe des cheveux de son front, pour les conduire par le droit chemin où il lui plaît.

D'HERBELOT 1697, 461

[I have put all my faith in God, who is my Lord and yours; for there is no creature on earth that he doesn't hold in between his hands by the forelock, to steer them through the straight path wherever he pleases.]

D'Herbelot's translation may appear, at first sight, to expose Muslim belief in “fatalism,” which would become a topos of European representations of the East (Daniel 2009, 181–185). The clarifications the author adduces, however, show that he reads this verse as a compelling affirmation that God is the final destination of all creation. Quoting another verse (Q 53:42), he observes that the “straight path” is the one that ends in God.³⁶ D'Herbelot then paraphrases an anonymous *poète mystique* whose glorification of the ultimate nature of God results, in a typical Sufi vein, in relativizing the nature of heaven and hell as well as underlining the inevitability of the ultimate meeting with one's Lord:

34 D'Herbelot's precise definition of Islam would call for nuancing Laurens's statement that the French scholar was incapable of grasping *la logique même de la religion musulmane* (Laurens 1978, 74).

35 Q 11:56 “I put my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no moving creature which He does not control. My Lord's way is straight” (Abdel Haleem 2004).

36 Q 53:42 “That the final goal is your Lord” (Abdel Haleem 2004).

Puisque tous les chemins qui se trouvent soit à droite, soit à gauche, tendent à lui, tu as beau faire, quelque chemin que tu prennes, tu iras vers lui, ou pour être récompensé, si tu as pris la droite, ou pour être puni, si tu as pris la gauche. Comme tout prend son origine de lui, il faut aussi que tout s'y termine.

D'HERBELOT 1697, 461–462

[Since all paths that exist, either on your right or on your left, lead to him, whatever you do, whatever the path you take, you will go to him, either to be rewarded if you took [the path on] the right or to be punished if you took [the path on] the left. Since everything originates from him, it must also be that all returns to it.]

The notion that all creation ultimately aims for God, besides being common in Sufi thought and supported by Qur'ānic verses, is also essential in Christian scholastic philosophy. In *Summa Contra Gentiles* ("The Absolute against the Infidels"), Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) famously argued that God is "the end of all things" and that ultimate felicity is only attained in his contemplation (Aquinas 1956, 97–103; Davies 2016, 222–243). D'Herbelot, and his theologically trained readers, could not fail but notice the striking convergence between the Qur'ānic citations, especially Q 53:42, and Thomistic theology. In highlighting these verses and their interpretations, d'Herbelot is presenting the finality of Islam in terms that must have impressed his fellow religionists. Islam may be a competing religion founded by an "impostor," but its values, goals, and methods converge, to a large extent, with those of Christianity. While D'Herbelot projects a Christian light onto Islam, he does so by citing Muslim authorities and, not least, the Qur'ān itself. His editorial choices are critical, but his voice defers to that of his sources. D'Herbelot's main challenge was not to accept the ethical and spiritual significance of Hūd's *exemplum* but to come to terms with the fact that it had been composed by a much-hated "heretic." The strong hostility he expresses towards the Prophet comes out at the end of the Hūd entry, where, as a counterweight perhaps to the charitable presentation that preceded, he stresses what he qualifies as the "great hypocrisy" of the founder of Islam:

Il y a plusieurs passages dans ce même chapitre intitulé *Houd*, touchant la predestination & la reprobaton positive, qui ont fait dire à l'imposteur qui l'a fabriqué par une hypocrisie qui n'a point sa pareille, que le chapitre Houd lui avoit fait venir les cheveux gris avant le temps, tant il en avoit été effrayé.

D'HERBELOT 1697, 462

[There are many passages in this short chapter [i.e., *sūra*] called Hūd that touch on predestination and positive [i.e., certain] reprobation, which led the impostor who fabricated it to say, with unparalleled hypocrisy, that the chapter Hūd had given him grey hair before its time because of the fright it caused him.]

While d'Herbelot intersperses his discourse with bouts of contempt for the Prophet, his appreciation for the wisdom contained in the Islamic tradition is consistent and extends, beyond mystical poetry, to the Qur'ān and its exegetical tradition. In the entry on Abraham, the scholar reports a lengthy citation of al-Bayḍāwī's (d. 719/1319) *Anwār al-Tanzīl* ("The Lights of Revelation"), which he describes as a literal *tafsīr* ("Anuar al-tanzil," d'Herbelot 1697, 118). The passage is an allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ānic account of Abraham's desire to witness the resurrection (Q 2:260). In response, God orders Abraham to take four birds, kill them,³⁷ mix their parts, and place a portion of the assortment on four hills. Abraham is then told to call the birds and witness their miraculous bodily revival. Al-Bayḍāwī's interpretation explains the symbolism of the four birds and offers d'Herbelot an opportunity to dwell on the theme of pious self-negation.

L'Auteur d'Anuār allégorise ainsi cette fable : "Tous ceux qui veulent faire vivre leur ame de la vie spirituelle, doivent égorger et sacrifier toutes leurs passions avec le glaive de la mortification, & faire en sorte qu'elles soient tellement confonduës, que l'on les trouve disposées à se laisser conduire par les ordres de Dieu : car alors le Seigneur en les appellant, les fait courir dans le chemin de sa Loy, jusqu'à ce qu'ils s'envolent au séjour du bonheur éternel. Ces quatre espèces d'oiseaux, dit le même Auteur, nous représentent les quatre passions principales qui doivent être mortifiées. La colombe qui est le symbole de l'amitié, & de la familiarité doit être sacrifiée par la retraite qui nous separe d'un trop grand commerce avec les hommes ; Le coq, qui est l'image de la concupiscence, est immolé par la continence ; Le corbeau, qui nous représente la gourmandise, est dompté par l'abstinence, et enfin le Paon, c'est-à-dire la vanité, & la complaisance pour nous-mêmes, doit être humilié."

D'HERBELOT 1697, 16

37 This is how d'Herbelot, following the majority of the exegetes, understands the verse. The phrase used (*surhunna ilayk*) isn't clear and has been glossed and translated as "incline them to you." The killing and dismembering of the birds are read into the following injunction *ij'al 'alā kullī jabalīn minhunna juz'an* ("put on each hill a portion of them").

[The author of the *Anwār* allegorizes this fable thus: “All those who want to make their soul live the spiritual life must slaughter and sacrifice all their passions with the sword of mortification, and work towards blending them to the point that they are ready to be led by God’s orders: for then, the Lord, by calling them, makes them run on the path of his Law until they fly to the abode of eternal bliss. These four species of birds, says the same author, represent for us the four principal passions that need to be mortified. The dove, which is the symbol of friendship and intimacy, must be sacrificed by the seclusion that separates us from too great commerce with people; the rooster, which is the image of concupiscence, is immolated by continence; the crow, which represents gluttony is tamed by abstinence, and, finally, the peacock, that is vanity and complacency for ourselves, must be humiliated.”]³⁸

As in the entry on *Hūd*, the markedly Christian notions (mortification, gluttony as sin, the importance of seclusion, eternal bliss) present d’Herbelot’s readers with an intelligible and appealing account of Muslim spirituality. A spiritual “eternal life” (*al-ḥayāt al-abadiyya*) is what awaits the virtuous, not sensual, delights. Since the Middle Ages, Christian authors mocked the material dimension of the Qur’ānic paradise and pointed to it as proof of Islam’s “irrational” character (Tolan 2002a). Wise men, by definition, can have no interest in earthly desires. D’Herbelot agrees—which is why he sets to demonstrate, in

38 The manuscript of al-Bayḍāwī’s *Tafsīr* consulted by d’Herbelot is held at the BNF, MS Arabe 629–630. Compare d’Herbelot translation with the original passage (MS Arabe 629, f. 84r and f. 84v):

قيل طاووساً وديكاً وغراباً وحمامة، ومنهم من ذكر النسر بدل الحمامة وفيه إيماء إلى أن إحياء النفس بالحياة الأبدية إنما يتأتى بإمانة حب الشهوات والرخارف التي هو صفة الطاووس، والصلوة المشهور بها الديك وخسة النفس وبعد الأمل المتصنف بهما الغراب، والترفع والمسارة إلى الهوى الموسوم بهما الحمام. (...) وفيه إشارة إلى أن من أراد إحياء نفسه بالحياة الأبدية، فعليه أن يقبل على القوى البدنية فيقتلها ويمزج بعضها ببعض حتى تنكسر سورتها، فيطاوله مسرعات متى دعاها بدعاية العقل أو الشرع

“It was said [that the four birds were] a peacock, a rooster, a crow and a pigeon, while some mentioned the eagle instead of the pigeon. This verse alludes to the fact that the revival of the soul with eternal life only comes with the killing of desires and [the relinquishing of] the ornaments which are characteristic of the peacock, the [love of] power for which the rooster is famous, the meanness of the soul and the excessive hope which both characterize the crow, and the presumption and haste towards passion which distinguish the pigeon ... [This verse] points towards the fact that whoever desires the revival of the soul with eternal life must face the bodily forces, kill them and blend them together until their vitality is crushed so that they obey him without delay whenever he calls on them for the purpose of reason or law.”

a dedicated entry ("Gennah," d'Herbelot 1697, 377) and through a selection of citations, that the "vision of God" is actually the highest reward for pious Muslims. By doing so, he explicitly invites his readers to amend old prejudices: "It is therefore not true, he writes, what many Authors who fought against Mohammedanism have told, namely that Muslims do not recognize any beatitude other than the enjoyment of the senses" (*Il n'est donc pas vray, ce que plusieurs Auteurs qui ont combattu le Mahometisme, ont avancé que les Musulmans ne reconnaissent point d'autre beatitude dans le ciel, que jouissance des plaisirs des sens*, d'Herbelot 1697, 376).

In the entry on Adam (d'Herbelot 1697, 54–55), the non-biblical motif of the primordial covenant between God's and Adam's progeny attracts d'Herbelot's attention and leads him to a reflection on the nature of time. The Qur'ānic episode, known in the exegetical tradition as *āyat al-mīthāq* (verse of the covenant), is reported in *sūrat al-A'rāf* (The Heights, Q 7:172–173):

when your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the Children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, "Am I not your Lord?" and they replied, "Yes, we bear witness." So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were not aware of this." Or, "It was our forefathers who, before us, ascribed partners to God, and we are only the descendants who came after them: will you destroy us because of falsehoods they invented?"

D'Herbelot considers what the concept of time entails in this passage. How should we understand the relationship between humanity's past testimony and our present condition? The French scholar reports four answers provided by "spiritual and devout" Muslims, which he orders according to the intensity of their mystical leanings. The first one (a certain "Ali Sahal Esfahani") recognizes the validity of this covenant and offers an ordinary conception of time divided between past, present, and future. To the question of whether he remembers having attested to God's lordship, "Esfahani" piously replies: "How could I forget what I uttered yesterday?" (*Comment se pourroit il faire que j'eusse oublié ce que je dis hier?*). According to the second figure ('Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī), however, "the true servant of God has no yesterday and no tomorrow" (*Le véritable serviteur de Dieu n'a point d'hier ni de demain*). This perspective is further developed by the third (anonymous) opinion: "The one who walks in God's presence and who minds him continuously also holds the past and the future to be always present" (*Celui qui marche en la presence de Dieu, & qui l'a continuellement*

dans sa pensée, a aussi le passé et le future toujours présent). The last opinion is that of the famed mystic al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922), who not only dissolves the distinction between past, present, and future but also shatters the misleading belief in human autonomy. As in the entry on Hūd, the point is made that, ultimately, God is all there is:

Houssayn, surnommé Hallage, ajoute à ces beaux sentiments, que le même qui fait cette interrogation, en forme aussi la réponse: car c'est Dieu qui nous dit dans le coeur: *Ne suis-je pas votre Maître*, & et c'est lui qui répond aussi-tôt: *Ouy*.

D'HERBELOT 1697, 55

[Ḥusayn, known as al-Ḥallāj, adds to these lofty feelings that the one who asks is also the one who answers: for it is God who tells us in our heart: *Am I not your Master* and it is him who immediately responds: *Yes*.]

Al-Ḥallāj is a figure much admired by d'Herbelot. In the entry on “Feraoun” (d'Herbelot 1697, 345), d'Herbelot contrasts al-Ḥallāj's famous historical statement, “I am God” (*Je suis Dieu*), with Pharaoh's words, “I am your God” (*Je suis votre Dieu*, ar. *anā rabbukum al-a'lā*, cf. Q 79:24). D'Herbelot, relying on the opinion of another mystic, explains that “Pharaoh only cared for himself” and had forgotten God, whereas al-Ḥallāj, thinking only of the Divine, had forgotten himself. The entry dedicated to the famous mystic (“Hallage,” d'Herbelot 1697, 423–424) reports verses attributed to the “wondrous man” (*l'homme merveilleux*) on the “burning of the love of God” and divine union. D'Herbelot is tempted to declare al-Ḥallāj a Christian, as—he notes—others before him have, but observes that the man insisted *ma foy est celle des vrais Musulmans, & ma secte est orthodoxe* (d'Herbelot 1697, 423).

The themes of self-sacrifice, radical love, and divine union are also prominent in the entry on Joseph (“Jousouf”). D'Herbelot devotes a long paragraph to the passionate love for him on the part of Zulaykha, the wife of his Egyptian master. Yūsuf and Zulaykha, explains d'Herbelot, have come to signify the irrepressible character of the believer's love for his Creator. The story teaches us that “to reach the possession of divine love, one has first to let go of all human considerations” (*Pour arriver a la possession de l'amour divin, il faut se défaire auparavant de toutes considérations humaines*, d'Herbelot 1697, 496). Elsewhere, the French scholar states that, according to the “most spiritual” of Muslim scholars, “life consists in the love of God” (“Haiat,” d'Herbelot 1697, 421). The entry on Lūt, which describes the prophet's anguished concern for his celestial guests, represents an opportunity to paraphrase a verse from Rūmī's

(d. 672/1273) *Mathnawī* ("Couplets"): "Whoever has bound his heart and submitted his mind to Him, has successfully freed himself from all afflictions that can befall him in this world and the next" (*Quiconque a attaché son cœur et soumis son esprit à luy s'est délivré heureusement de toutes les afflictions qui luy peuvent arriver dans ce monde & dans l'autre*) (d'Herbelot 1697, 521).

D'Herbelot's awareness of the importance of love in Islam is remarkable, although not entirely unprecedented. Before him, the Catalan medieval maverick—philosopher, mystic, missionary, and poet—Ràmon Llull (1232–1316) wrote *Llibre d'Amic e Amat* ("Book of the Lover and the Beloved") following the example of "Saracen" religious men who "had words of love and brief examples which aroused great devotion in men" (Llull 1985, 189).³⁹ For the vast majority of European Christians, however, the notion of an ardent love that binds the believer to God is not one that was readily associated with Islam. Muḥammad's "carnal" religion was not supposed to be conducive to such spiritual elevation. European travelers struck by the piety and moral values that Muslims displayed, remarked that these virtues developed *despite* their faith rather than *because* of it. In the words of a contemporary missionary, devotion and good morals among Muslims are "no proof of the goodness of their religion, only of the goodness of their nature" (Nau 1684, "Avertissement"; see also Carnoy 1998, 238–258).

D'Herbelot's reserves an entry for the Sufi notion of "passionate love" (Ar. *ishq*). There, he suggests an equivalence between Islam and Christianity: "Mahometans (...) have had such lofty feelings on the love of God that they seem to have matched Christians."⁴⁰ Elsewhere in the BO, a convergence between Christianity and Islam is interpreted as evidence of Islam's Christian (heretical) origin.⁴¹ Here, however, Muslim expression of the love of God is presented as indigenous. The entry on the "love of God" is rich and well structured ("Eschk Allah," d'Herbelot 1697, 321). After introducing the Arabic vocabulary used to denote love (*ḥubb*, *maḥabba*, *ishq*, *shawq*, *ishtiyāq*, *wajd*), d'Herbelot examines the interpretations of the foundational Qur'ānic passage on the subject ("God loves them, and they love him," Q 5:54) and, finally, concludes with several Sufi poems and aphorisms celebrating the union of the soul with God. D'Herbelot's entry on "divine love" pictures Islam, possibly for the first time in

39 For a study of Llull's relation to Islam, see Simon 1998.

40 "Eschk Allah," d'Herbelot 1697, 321: "il ne faut pas s'étonner si les Mahométans qui ont plus de lumière que les Idolâtres, ont eu des sentiments si relevés touchant à l'amour de Dieu, qu'ils semblent avoir égalé les Chrétiens sur cette matière."

41 This is the case in the entries on forgiveness ("Afu," d'Herbelot 1697, 66), paradise ("Gennah," d'Herbelot 1697, 376) and wisdom ("Hekmah," d'Herbelot 1697, 441).

European intellectual history, as a coherent, rich, and inspiring tradition in its own right.

How does d'Herbelot justify his consideration for mystical insights from a rival religion? Some passages of the *Bibliothèque* delineate what we may call, relying on modern terminology, an inclusivist theology of religion (Kärkkäinen 2003, 24–25). D'Herbelot confers a unique status onto Christian truth:

Le pur, & le veritable amour de Dieu, ne se trouve que dans le Christianisme, puisqu'il est le propre effet de la grace de Jesus-Christ, & une operation particulière du Saint Esprit suivant les paroles de l'Apotre qui dit, que la charité de Dieu est repandue dans nos coeurs par l'esprit saint qui est communiqué.

"Eschk Allah," D'HERBELOT 1697, 321

[The pure and veritable love of God is only found in Christianity since it is the proper effect of the grace of Jesus Christ and a particular operation of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the words of the Apostle who said that charity of God is extended in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that is communicated.]⁴²

Yet, D'Herbelot grants non-Christians the ability to know God, for, indeed, "the invincible force of truth (...) pierces even the thickest darkness of error" ("Gennah," d'Herbelot 1697, 376). D'Herbelot values the lived experience of the Divine above its rational or dogmatic understanding. The body of knowledge dedicated to attaining divine intimacy constitutes a *théologie mystique* aiming at "the intimate union with the Divine, that takes place in the heart of man once it is detached from the love of material things and transported out of himself" ("Hallage," d'Herbelot 1697, 424).⁴³ The expression "mystical theology" draws on a long Christian tradition going back to the Neoplatonist theologian pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fifth century CE), author of a Greek treatise entitled *Peri Mustikes Theologias* ("On Secret Scriptures").⁴⁴ D'Herbelot innovatively extends the notion to the esoteric traditions of non-Christian religions.

42 While we have no reason to doubt d'Herbelot's commitment to Christianity, the textbook formulation and the reference to Paul would indicate that it serves here as a token of the author's orthodoxy before he embarks on an exposition of Muslim understandings of love.

43 "L'union intime de la Divinite au Coeur de l'homme détaché de l'amour des choses de la terre, & transporté hors de soy."

44 For an insightful account of the relationship between Neoplatonist thought and Christian and Islamic mysticism, see Sedgwick 2016.

Muslims have their own *Docteurs de la Theologie mystique* (d'Herbelot 1697, 5) to whom al-Ḥallāj, Rūmī, and Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240) ("Arabi," d'Herbelot 1697, 121) belong. The experience of divine presence is shared regardless of one's beliefs. The clearest exposition of d'Herbelot's theology of religions is found in the entry on the Islamic concept of "Din" (religion), where he reports that God "is the circle where all the lines and all the ways from different religions lead" ("Din," d'Herbelot 1697, 296). The statement is attributed to the Sufi philosopher Sadreddin Kenaoui (Ṣadr al-Dīn Qūnawī, d. 673/1274). D'Herbelot duly notes the heretical potential of a view that denies religious exclusivism, and he refrains from fully endorsing it. Still, it is a view that seems to accord with his own non-confessional understanding of mysticism.

D'Herbelot's universal understanding of mysticism was not entirely novel. More than two centuries before, the Renaissance theologian and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) had suggested that elements of truth can be found in other religions, although Christianity was its most perfect embodiment. An advocate of *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) and *theosis* (union or assimilation in God), Nicholas held all religions to be expressions of one universal faith shared by all humanity: *una religio in rituum varietate*, as he famously put it. His religious pluralism may well have been inspired by the Qur'ānic doctrine of prophetology (Valkenberg 2014). The Cusan theologian was deeply familiar with the Qur'ān, which he had studied in its Latin translation. In *Cribatio Alchorani* ("Sifting the Qur'ān," 1461), Nicholas argued that the "Book of the Arabs" confirmed the Christian truth.

There was, nevertheless something specific about the time and place in which d'Herbelot was writing. A "crisis of mysticism" was about to shake Europe, particularly France (McGinn 2021). From the Middle Ages to the Spanish Golden Century of Teresa of Avila (d. 1582) and John of the Cross (d. 1591), religious authorities reacted to mystical outbursts with ambivalence, celebrating the mystics' insights while reaffirming traditional orthodoxy. In its fight against the Reformation, the French Catholic Revival had initially welcomed the popular enthusiasm for mystical forms of piety. As a result, France became the center of Catholic mysticism in the early part of the seventeenth century. The writings of mystics such as Francis of Sales (d. 1622), Pierre de Bérulle (d. 1629), Brother Lawrence (Laurent de la Resurrection, d. 1691), and François Malaval (d. 1719) popularized the themes of self-abnegation, the unification of the soul with the Divine, and the pure love of God, which figure prominently in the religious entries of the *Bibliothèque* (McGinn 2020). Mystical yearnings became increasingly popular in France and beyond until political and religious authorities of the Catholic world, fearing an erosion of their power, aggressively clamped down on the movement. The latter part

of the century was marked by what became known as the “quietist” controversy. The origins of the controversy lay in the 1675 publication of Miguel de Molinos’ (d. 1696) *Guida Spirituale* (“The Spiritual Guide”), which quickly became an international bestseller.⁴⁵ The inner practices preached by Molinos, in particular, the “prayer of the quiet” advocated by Teresa of Avila (d. 1582), drew on a tradition of monastical mysticism. While many of Molinos’ ideas were not new, their instant popularity was deemed threatening by religious authorities invested in consolidating their institutional control. Direct contact with the Divine was theologically problematic and politically dangerous because it nullified the need for the Church, the sacraments, good works, and even the incarnate Christ. Claiming one’s total surrender to God’s will raised, in turn, complex issues of moral responsibility and free will (Lennon 2019). While the Spanish theologian was arrested and excommunicated in 1687, the papal condemnation did not put an end to the quietist controversy.

The second act of the dispute took place in France, in d’Herbelot’s immediate intellectual circle. Known as “the dispute on pure love” (*la querelle du pur amour*), it opposed two of the most powerful churchmen at the court of Louis XIV: Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (d. 1704) and François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénélon (d. 1715). The latter, under the guidance of Madame Guyon (d. 1717), a disciple of Molinos whom he had met in 1688, advocated love for God so absolute that it rendered the hope for salvation irrelevant. Bossuet, on the other hand, considered “pure love” to contradict the Christological doctrine of the Church. After years of intense polemical sparring between the two French intellectuals, the Pope intervened in 1699 at the request of Louis XIV to officially condemn Fénélon—four years after d’Herbelot’s death. The composition of the *Bibliothèque Orientale* occupied d’Herbelot for three decades, from the end of the golden period of French mysticism to the beginning of the quietist controversy. A massive enterprise of orientalist erudition, the *Bibliothèque* cannot be reduced to the mystical elements found in a fraction of its entries. However, neither can it be read in isolation from one of the great intellectual disputes of the time, whose philosophical ramifications had captivated Europe’s intellectual elite.⁴⁶ D’Herbelot had frequented the “Petit concile,” a study group founded by Bossuet in 1673 to address the theological challenges

45 “Spiritual Guide, which releases the soul and conducts it through the interior path to acquire the perfect contemplation and rich treasure of interior peace” (1675). Originally in Spanish.

46 The philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (d. 1716), who had closely followed the debate from Germany, exclaimed his relief when the papal condemnation of Fénélon (d. 1715) in 1699 put an abrupt and final end to the dispute on pure love: “God be praised, let the newspapers at last speak of something else!” (cited by Lennon 2019: x).

posed by the reformation and humanist philology, dissolved in 1682. Since Fénelon was also one of its members, it has been suggested that the personal dimension of the dispute on pure love can be traced back to that assembly (Preyat 2007, 19 and 58). The mystical advocacy characterizing the religious entries in the *Bibliothèque* suggests the work was also an intervention in contemporary Catholic debates. Oriental erudition, to which d'Herbelot dedicated his life, allowed the author to safely explore controversial themes common to both Christian and Muslim mystical traditions.

6 Conclusion

The Qur'ān in the *Bibliothèque Orientale* is variously conceptualized as the fake scripture of a rival religion, the product of Christian Eastern heretical traditions, a historical document, a purveyor of literary entertainment, and a source of spiritual wisdom. In this chapter, I have focused on how d'Herbelot construed Qur'ānic narratives as vehicles of ethical insights. Three conditions made the ethico-spiritual reception of Qur'ānic narratives possible in early modern France: humanism, the literary fascination for the oriental tradition of storytelling, and debates about mysticism in the Catholic Revival.

The *Bibliothèque's* humanist practices of translation and encyclopedic knowledge offered a relatively direct encounter with the "Orient." By adopting his sources' point of view, d'Herbelot was able to preserve the integrity, entertaining quality, and moral focus of the Qur'ānic narratives. Polemical remarks target the prophet primarily and rarely interrupt the exposition of beliefs or narratives.

The *Bibliothèque* must also be placed in the context of the seventeenth-century literary fascination for the "oriental" tradition of storytelling. D'Herbelot and his readers approached the stories of prophets as products of that tradition. The appeal of oriental storytelling opens a space where the Qur'ān itself can be engaged outside the context of Christian polemics. Tales from the colorful *qışaş al-anbiyā'* genre no longer need to be systematically evaluated according to their compatibility with biblical counterparts. Seen as the product of a lively imagination, these stories can be valued for their exotic novelty, narrative richness, and clever moral, not unlike Pilpay's tales and Sa'dī's *Gulistān*.

Finally, at a time when intense theological debates were beginning to polarize the Church, d'Herbelot's valorization of mysticism pushed him towards allegorical interpretation. The traditional exegesis of Qur'ānic narratives provides him with occasions to meditate on the increasingly controversial themes of self-abnegation and divine union. In the early stage of what would become

the quietist dispute, years before the shocking condemnation of Fénélon, “mystical theology” was the talk of the day. The similarities between Christian and Islamic mysticism rendered the latter both intelligible and familiar to the *Bibliothèque*’s readers. Drawing on an old polemical motif, d’Herbelot considered the Qur’ān to be a hodgepodge of biblical traditions resulting from Muḥammad’s cunning, but this did not deter him from valuing the mystical interpretation that it gave rise to.

The approach to the Orient delineated in the monumental *Bibliothèque* enabled the new valorization of Islam that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century. For over a century, the BO constituted the most important European reference to Islamic civilization. It is based on d’Herbelot’s work that the great figure of the French Enlightenment, Voltaire, confidently outlined the ethical gist of Islam’s foundational text (cited in Elmarsafy 2009, 109):

Tous les interprètes de ce livre conviennent que sa morale est contenue dans ses paroles : “recherchez qui vous chasse ; donnez à qui vous ôte ; pardonnez à qui vous offense ; faites du bien à tous, ne contestez point avec les ignorants.”

[All the interpreters of this book agree that its moral message is contained in these words: Seek those who persecute you; give to those who take from you; forgive those who offend you; do good to all and do not argue with the ignorant.]⁴⁷

Voltaire’s representation of the ethics of the Qur’ān shows the extent to which Enlightenment thinkers embraced d’Herbelot’s characterization. The Christian orientation implicit in d’Herbelot’s account of Qur’ānic ethics aptly represents the complex sensibility of its author. D’Herbelot’s work invites us to rethink the rupture between pre- and post-Enlightenment European engagements with the Qur’ān. The mysticism that shaped d’Herbelot’s work demonstrates that a less antagonistic reading of Islam emerged from within religious thought, not outside of it (Bevilacqua 2018). The *Bibliothèque* highlights the role played by the Qur’ān and the Islamic religion in European intellectual and literary life at the dawn of the Enlightenment.

47 Voltaire’s source is the BO entry on “Alcoran” (d’Herbelot 1697, 88). The English translation is Elmarsafy’s.

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Appendix

Figures or Narratives from the Qur'ān in the *Bibliothèque Orientale*

- i. Abraha, p. 12
- ii. Abraham, pp. 12–16
- iii. Abu Nava's, pp. 29–30 (on *sūrat al-Burūj*, The Mansions of the Stars)
- iv. Ad/Add, pp. 51–52
- v. Adam, pp. 53–56
- vi. Aiub, p. 81
- vii. Cabil, p. 222
- viii. Eblis/Iblis, pp. 307–308
- ix. Edris/Idris, p. 310
- x. Escander/Iskander, pp. 317–318
- xi. Feraoun/Firaoun, pp. 345–347
- xii. Gebrail, pp. 365–366
- xiii. Hagiar, p. 420
- xiv. Ham Ben Nouh, p. 425
- xv. Haroun, p. 434
- xvi. Havah, pp. 428–429
- xvii. Houd, pp. 460–462
- xviii. Jacob fils d'Isaac, pp. 466–467
- xix. Iahia Ben Zacaria, pp. 471–472
- xx. Jounous, p. 495
- xxi. Jousouf ben Jacob, pp. 496–497
- xxii. Issa Ben Miriam, pp. 499–500
- xxiii. Ismael, p. 501
- xxiv. Locman, pp. 516–517

- xxv. Lot, pp. 520–522
- xxvi. Miriam, pp. 583–584
- xxvii. Moussa Ben Amran, pp. 647–650
- xxviii. Nemrod, pp. 668–669
- xxix. Nouh AlNabi, pp. 675–677
- xxx. O'zair, pp. 697–698
- xxxi. Salah, pp. 740–741
- xxxii. Scho'aib, pp. 790–791
- xxxiii. Soliman Ben Daoud, pp. 819–821
- xxxiv. Zakaria, p. 922
- xxxv. Khazkil (Ezechiel), p. 992
- xxxvi. Kheder, pp. 992–993
- xxxvii. Thalout, pp. 1021–1022
- xxxviii. Thamoud, p. 1023

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Index of Names and Places

- Aaron (Hārūn) 26, 56, 236, 248–250, 252, 288^{m9}
- ‘Abd Allāh (Prophet Muḥammad’s father) 128
- ‘Abd Allāh ibn Salām 186
- ‘Abd al-Jabbār, Al-Qāḍī 26, 30
- ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib 128–129
- ‘Abduh, Muḥammad 197–199, 203
- Abel (Hābīl) 2, 9–12, 13ⁿ, 15–16, 18–19, 22–38
See also Abel and Cain, Cain
- Abel and Cain 2, 9ⁿ, 12, 33, 34, 36, 38
- Abraha 290
- Abraham (Ibrāhīm) 2, 4–5, 21, 49–50, 55–57, 93, 95–96, 98, 101–106, 110, 112, 121–122, 125–126, 128–129, 131–140, 144–146, 148, 190, 196–198, 227–229, 231, 236–237, 239–246, 252–253, 282, 287, 289–290, 295, 297
- Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm 17
- Abū Dāwūd 23ⁿ
- Abū Dharr 23
- Abū Ḥanīfa 191
- Abū Ḥarb, Saḥar 9–10, 37
Lā Takun ka-Bnay Ādam: Lā Qātilan wa-Lā Maqtūlan 9
- Abū Ḥayyān 19, 22, 29
- Abū Hurayra 186
- Abū Sa’id al-Khudrī 69
- Abu Simbel 52
- Abu ‘Ubayd 195–196
Gharīb al-Ḥadīth 195
- ‘Ād 46–47, 56–57, 60, 69, 77, 82–84, 86, 195, 291–295
- Adam, Ādam 2, 5, 12, 14–15, 29, 31–34, 38, 45, 55–56, 142, 196–198, 226–227, 247, 251, 271, 282, 287–288, 289ⁿ²¹, 295, 299
two sons of ~ 9–15, 19–20, 23, 25–29, 32–34, 38–39
See also Abel, Cain
- Adam and Eve 55
- Adivar, Adnan 212
- Aesop (Pilpay) 284^{m1}, 285, 292ⁿ²⁸, 305
- Agamemnon 128
- Ahijah 166
- Akın-Kıvanç, Esra 262, 267, 270
- Āli, Mustafa 258–259, 262, 267–270, 274
Menākib-i Hünervērān 267
- ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib 263, 266, 269, 274, 281
- Allāh. See God
- Amin, Taira 3, 152
- Amram (‘Imrān) 55, 193
- Anas Ibn Mālik 186ⁿ
- Anatolia 212
- Ancient House. See Ka’ba
- Anṣārī, Bayāzīd 211
- al-Anṣārī, ‘Abd Allāh 299
- Anushirvan. See Khusruw I
- Aquinas, Thomas 296
Summa Contra Gentiles 296
- Arab peninsula 110
- Arabia 44–46, 106
- al-Ardabilī, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad 192
- Aristotle 213, 218
- Armstrong, Lyall R. 195
- Artemis 128
See also gods
- Aṣḥāb al-Ayka (The People of the Thicket or The Inhabitants of Tanglewood).
See Madyan
- Aṣḥāb al-Kahf (Seven Sleepers of Ephesus) 70, 186
- Aṣḥāb al-Ukhdūd 186
- al-Ash’arī, Abū al-Ḥasan 26, 28
- Āshif ibn Barkhiyā 158
- ‘Athamina, Khalil 195
- Attallah, Halla 4, 234, 242ⁿ
- ‘Aṭṭār, Farīd al-Dīn 202, 211, 217
Muṣibatnāma 202
- ‘Aydḥāb 80
- Aynī, Mehmet 212
- Aytaç, Hamid 258
- Ayūb. See Job
- Āzar 289
- Badat, Bilal 4, 257
- al-Badrāwī, Rushdī 198
- Baghdad 59, 225
- al-Baghdādī, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf 79
al-Ifāda wa-l-’Itibār 79
- Baghdādī, Junayd 213

- Bāḥādhīq, 'Umar Muḥammad 'Umar 199
 Banū Hāshim 129
 Banū al-Naḍīr 13
 al-Bāqillānī 24
 Bauer, Karen 168
 al-Bayḍāwī 297, 298n
 Anwār al-Tanzīl 297
 Baynton, Douglas 238
 Berbers 79
 Bérulle, Pierre de 303
 Bevilacqua, Alexander 279–280, 288, 306
 Biden, Joe 120
 Bihzad 270
 Bilqīs. *See* the Queen of Sheba
 al-Biqā'ī 196
 al-Bisṭāmī, Abū Yazīd 213
 Bodman, Whitney S. 201
 Booth, Wayne 200
 Bossuet, Jacques-Bénigne 280n2, 304
 Bourzeis, Abbé 280n2
 Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā') 25, 211
 al-Buḥturī 59
 al-Būkhārī 24n, 309g, 31n, 33n, 186,
 190nn5–8, 191n9
 Bursa 212, 262n
 Byron, John 11, 25n
 Byzantine Emperor 132n13
- Cain (Qābīl) 2, 9, 11–12, 14–16, 18–19, 22–23,
 25, 31–38
 See also Abel, Abel and Cain
 Cairo 212
 Celāleddin, Mahmud 258
 Çelebi, Mustafa Sâ'ī 260–261
 Ceylon 45
 Christ (Issa, Jesus) 24–25, 57–58, 68,
 108–110, 126–131, 132n13, 138, 138n22,
 146–148, 176, 194, 279, 282, 288, 302, 304
 Çörekciẓāde, Mehmed Efendi 273
 Cousin, Louis 280n1
 Creator. *See* God
- Damascus 212
 al-Dardīr 139n23, 143
 Darwin 197
 David (Dāwūd) 57, 154, 160–166, 169, 171,
 179, 191, 237–238, 261
 Dawwānī, Jalāl al-Dīn 213
 Akhḷāq-i Jalālī 213
- de La Fontaine, Jean 285
 de Somerville, Antoine 286n15
 Decius (Roman Emperor) 70
 Deity. *See* God
 Delaney, Carol 138
 Abraham on Trial 138
 Dew, Nicolas 280n2, 283
 al-Dhahabī, Shams al-Dīn 79, 186
 al-'Ibar fī Khabar man Ghabar 79
 d'Herbelot, Barthélemy 5, 279–283,
 285–306
 Bibliothèque Orientale (BO) 5, 279,
 280n1, 281–283, 284n8, 285, 286n14,
 287, 288n18, 291, 292nn26–28, 293–295,
 301, 304–306
 al-Dinawarī 187
 Dionysius the Areopagite, pseudo- 302
 Peri Mustikes Theologias 302
 Dome of the Rock 93
 Donner, Fred 86
 Draz, Mohamed Abdallah 30n8, 31, 202
 Du Ryer, André 284–286
 Alcoran 281–282, 286n15
 Dynasties. *See* 'Ād, Aṣḥāb al-Ayka, Aṣḥāb
 al-Ukhdūd, Gomorrah, al-Ḥijr, Iram,
 Madyan, Saba', Sodom, Thamūd
- Edirne 212
 Egypt 50, 68, 78–79, 84, 110
 Ermiş, Fatih 4, 210
 Esfahani, Ali Sahal 299
 Ethiopia 285
 Europe 5, 120, 279–280, 284n10, 289,
 303–304, 306
- Fadel, Mohammad 3, 120
 Fārī'a 156
 Farsani, Yoones Dehghani 211
 Fátima 222–223
 Fénélon, François de Salignac de La Mothe-
 304–306
 Feraoun. *See* Pharaoh
 Firdawsī-yi Tūsī 211
 Shāhnāma 211, 217–218, 231
 Foucault, Michel 216
 France 284nn8–9, 285, 303–305
 Francis of Sales 303
 Fukuyama, Francis 120
 The End of History 120

- Galland, Antoine 281, 283–286, 288ⁿ18
 Garden of Eden 45, 55
 Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie 237
 Gaulmin, Gilbert 284–286, 292ⁿ28
 Libre des Lumières 284ⁿ11, 285ⁿ12, 286
 Germany 123, 304ⁿ46
 al-Ghazālī 185, 202, 210–211, 231
 Ay Farzand 210
 al-Ghazzī, Badr al-Dīn 212
 al-Ghazzī, Najm al-Dīn 34–36
 Ḥusn al-Tanabbuh li-Mā Warada fi
 al-Tashabbuh 35
 Ghijduwānī, ‘Abd al-Khālīq 218, 231
 God (Allāh, Creator, Deity, Lord) *passim*
 gods. *See* Nasr, Suwā‘, Wadd, Yaghūth, Ya‘ūq
 Goliath 161
 Gomorrah 47, 78
 Graybill, Rhiannon 250, 252
 Guyon, Madame 304
- Hābil. *See* Abel
 Hāfizzāde 258, 262–266, 270
 Risāle-i Hat 262
 Hājar 186
 Ḥajjī Khalifa 281ⁿ5
 Kashf al-Ẓunūn 281ⁿ5
 al-Ḥākīm al-Naysābūrī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd
 Allāh 186
 al-Ḥallāj 299–300, 302
 Halliday 155
 Hāmān 50
 Hamdān, king 160
 Hamdullah, Ṣeyh 258, 267ⁿ, 272
 Ḥamīdī Efendi, ‘Abd al-Qadīr 212
 Hamilton, Alastair 279, 286ⁿ15
 al-Ḥarrālī 196
 Ḥaram al-Sharīf 93
 Hārūn. *See* Aaron
 Hārūn al-Rashīd 281
 Hārūt and Marūt (Angels in Babel) 177
 al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī 17
 Hassan, Abla 159–160
 Henninger, Joseph 131, 140ⁿ25–26
 Ḥijāz 154, 291
 al-Ḥijr. *See* Rocky Tract
 Hızır (Khidr) 158, 219, 221, 227–228, 231, 265
 Holy Spirit 302
 Horovitz, Joseph 58, 61
- Hottinger, Johann 289ⁿ22
 Historia Orientalis 289ⁿ22
 Houd (Hūd) 46, 56, 271, 282, 287, 291–298,
 300
 House. *See* Ka’ba
 Hūd. *See* Houd
 al-Ḥusayn 25
- Ibn ‘Abbās 22, 186
 Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām, ‘Izz al-Dīn 143, 193
 Ibn ‘Aqīla, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad 185
 Ibn al-‘Arabī, Muḥyī al-Dīn 135
 Ibn ‘Ashūr, Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir 19, 25, 51
 Ibn ‘Aṭīyya, Abū Muḥammad 18, 30–32
 Ibn Ḥajar 196
 Ibn Ḥanbal, Aḥmad 143, 186ⁿ
 Ibn al-Hayṣam, Abū al-Ḥasan 188
 Ibn Ḥazm, Abū Muḥammad 25–26, 189
 Ibn Ḥimyar, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sabtī 194
 Tanzīh al-Anbiyā’ ‘ammā Nasab ilayhim
 Ḥuthālat al-Aghbiyā’ 194
 Ibn Ḥinnā’ī. *See* Kīnālīzāde
 Ibn Hishām, ‘Abd al-Malik 32–33, 53, 128
 Ibn Ishāq 293
 Kitāb al-Mubtada’ 293
 Sirat Rasūl Allāh 293
 Ibn al-Jawzī, Abū al-Faraj 194–195
 Ṣifāt al-Ṣafwa 194
 Ibn Jubayr 79
 Ibn Kathīr 69, 156–160, 196
 Ibn Khaldūn 60, 79
 Muqaddima 79
 Ibn Māja 23ⁿ
 Ibn al-Shāṭ 21
 Ibn Taymiyya 19, 69–70, 195
 al-Jawāb al-Ṣaḥīḥ 69
 Ibn Ṭufayl 211
 Ibn Ṭulūn, Shams al-Dīn 212
 Quḍāt Dimashq 212
 Ibn-i Seyyid Ali 272
 Ṣerḥi Ṣir’atūl-Islām 272
 Ibrāhīm. *See* Abraham
 Idrīs 57, 271
 ‘Imrān. *See* Amram
 India 12, 286
 Iqlīma 12
 Iram 46
 al-‘Irāqī, Zayn al-Dīn 195

- Isaac 121–122, 126–129, 134, 135*n*19, 136*n*, 138, 146–148, 242–243, 252
- Iṣfahānī, Dāwūd bin Sayyid 284*n*11
- Iṣḥāq ibn Bishr 187
- Ishmael (Ismā'īl) 21, 57, 136*n*, 186
- Ismā'īl. *See* Ishmael
- Israel 122, 125–126, 170
- Children of ~ 14–15, 32, 50–51, 161
- community of ~ 148
- people of ~ 122
- Sons of ~ 84
- Isrāfīl 272
- Issa. *See* Christ
- Istanbul 212, 262*n*
- Īwān Kistrā "the Arched Hall of the Shah" 59
- Izutsu, Toshihiko 106–107, 202, 237
- ‘Izz al-Dīn Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām 193
- Jacob (Ya'qūb) 136*n*, 156, 242–243, 252, 282
- Jād al-Mawlā, Muḥammad Aḥmad 197
- Qīṣaṣ al-Qur'ān* 197
- Ja'far al-Ṣādiq 211
- al-Jāḥiẓ 14–16, 33
- al-Jaṣṣāṣ, Abū Bakr 23–25, 28, 189*n*3, 192
- Jeddah 240
- Jerusalem 2, 70, 93
- Jesus. *See* Christ
- Jethro (Reuel, Shu'ayb) 49–50, 56, 86, 287
- Jibrīl 158
- al-Jīlī 196
- Job (Ayūb) 202, 240
- John the Baptist 57, 288*n*19
- John of the Cross 303
- Johns, Antony 152, 201, 203
- Jonah (Yūnus) 81, 191
- Jordan River valley 78
- Joseph, Jousouf ben Jacob (Yūsuf) 5, 33–34, 152, 156, 198, 282, 295, 300
- brothers of ~ 33–34
- Junior, Nyasha 250
- al-Jushamī, al-Ḥākim al-Muḥsin ibn Muḥammad 13–14, 17, 19–20, 192–193
- Ka'b al-Aḥbār 186
- Ka'ba (Ancient House, House) 21, 139, 191*n*8, 220, 224, 290
- Kahn, Paul W. 3, 120–127, 129, 137, 144–149
- Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* 3, 121
- Kant, Immanuel 128
- Karahisārī, Ahmed 258, 272
- al-Kāshānī, ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Aḥmad 36
- al-Kāshifī, Ḥusayn Wā'iz 284*n*11, 292*n*28, 293
- Tafsīr-i Ḥusaynī (Mawāhib-i ‘Alīyya)* 292*n*28
- al-Kawwāz, Muḥammad Karīm 199
- Kemp, Peter 96
- Kenaoui, Sadreddin (Qūnawī, Ṣadr al-Dīn) 303
- Kennedy, Philip F. 201
- Kermani, Navid 202
- The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt* 202
- Keyumars, King 218
- Khalaf Allāh, Muḥammad Aḥmad 199, 203
- al-Khaṭīb, ‘Abd al-Karīm 186*n*, 199
- al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī 186*n*
- Khiḍr. *See* Hızır
- Khondemir 292
- Khulāṣat al-Akhbār* 292*n*27
- al-Khūshābī, Muḥammad ibn Baṣṭām 188
- ‘Arā’is al-Qur’ān wa-Nafā’s al-Furqān wa-Farādis al-Jinān* 188
- Khusruw I (Anushirvan, Nouschirvan) 281
- Kil (Qayl) 291–294
- Kınālīzāde, ‘Alī Çelebī (Ibn Ḥinnā’ī) 4, 211–213, 215–218, 228, 232
- Akhlaq-i ‘Alā’ī* 212–213, 218, 231
- Klar, Marianna 201
- Koloska, Hannelies 2, 93
- La Mothe Le Vayer, François De 216
- Lassner, Jacob 154, 177, 201
- Lawler, Steph 167–168
- Lawrence, Brother (Laurent de la Resurrection) 303
- Leeuwen, Van 154–155, 161, 167–169, 176, 178
- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 304*n*46
- Lighthouse at/of Alexandria 79–80
- Llull, Ramón 301
- Llibre d'Amic e Amat* 301
- Lord. *See* God
- Lot (Lūṭ) 2, 47–50, 56–58, 69, 76, 82–83, 98, 101, 104–106, 110, 112, 241–242, 295, 300

- Louis XIV 280, 304
 Luqmān (Locman Al Hakim) 285
 Lūt. *See* Lot
 Lyūdhā 12
- Machiavelli 216
 MacIntyre, Alasdair 200
 Madyan, Midian (Aṣḥāb al-Ayka) 49–50, 56, 69, 79, 86, 116, 250
 Maghreb 201
 Maḥfūz, Najīb 37
Awlād Ḥāratinā 37
 Mahomet. *See* Muḥammad
 Malaval, François 303
 Mālik 191
 Mani 270
 al-Manṣūr, caliph 283
 Manuel II Paleologus 132n13
 al-Maqrīzī 79
al-Mawā'iz wa-l-I'tibār bi-Dhikr al-Khiṭaṭ wa-l-Āthār 79
 Ma'rīb dam 52, 78, 87
 Marthad (Morthad) 291, 293–294
 al-Marwazī, Muḥammad ibn Naṣr 17
 Mary (Maryam, Miriam) 58, 108, 176, 191, 241, 279, 282, 288–289
 Maryam, Miriam. *See* Mary
 Mattson, Ingrid 240, 247, 254
 al-Māturīdī, Abū Manṣūr 13–15, 17–18, 23–24, 26–29, 196
 Mecca 12, 13n, 130, 141n28, 290–291, 293
 Medina 240
 Mediterranean 128, 280
 Mehmed II, Prince 212
 Mehmed bin Hüsameddin 262n
 Mephibosheth 238
 Minā 141n28, 147
 Miskawayh, Abū 'Alī Aḥmad 61, 210–211, 217
 Mitchell, David T. 237
 Molinos, Miguel de 303–304
Guida Spirituale 304
 Morthad. *See* Marthad
 Moses (Mūsā) 4, 26, 37, 49, 50, 56–57, 68–69, 84–85, 109n8, 131n10, 190–192, 198, 219–225, 227–228, 231, 236–237, 241, 247–254, 265, 268, 271, 282, 287
 Mount al-Jūdī 45
 Mount Zion 126
- Mu'adh 186n
 Mu'āwiya 293–294
 Mubarak, Hadia 238
 Muḥammad (Mahomet) 13–14, 19, 24, 32, 45, 49–50, 55, 58, 60, 68, 72, 78, 82, 85, 99, 128–129, 132n11, 132n13, 138, 143n32, 153, 186, 188–190, 199, 201, 240–241, 247, 251, 253, 260–261, 263, 275, 281–282, 288–289–290, 294, 301, 306
 Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Shaybānī 191
 al-Muḥāsibī 211
 Mujir al-Dīn 93
 Muqātil ibn Sulaymān 187
 Murad IV (sultan) 271
 Muslim, Imam 24n, 30n9, 31n, 33n, 190n5, 190nn6–7, 191nn8–9
 Mustafa İzzet Efendi, Kazasker 258
- Nabataean capital 46
 al-Najjār, 'Abd al-Wahhāb 197
 Nasr 45
 Nasr, Seyyed Hossein 12n, 131n9, 134, 136, 139n24, 140, 141n27, 142n
 Nathan 166
 Nāyif, Bashshār Ibrāhīm 199
 Near East 128, 130, 132–133
 Necipoğlu, Gülrü 261n
 Nefeszâde, İbrahim 264n, 270–271
Gülzâr-ı Savâb 264n, 270–272
 Nelson, Kristina 235
 Nettler, Ronald L. 196
 Neuwirth, Angelika 55–56, 58, 61, 98–101, 108n, 111, 152–153, 163, 179, 200–201, 203, 237, 241, 253
 Newton, Adam 200
 Nicholas of Cusa 303
Cribatio Alchorani 303
 Al-Nisābūrī 67
 Noah (Nouh al-Nabi, Nūḥ) 45–46, 51, 56–58, 60, 63, 69, 78, 82, 86, 190, 261, 282
 Nouh al-Nabi. *See* Noah
 Nouschirvan. *See* Khusrw I
 Nūḥ. *See* Noah
 Nussbaum, Martha 200
- Occident 285
 Okyay, Necmeddin 258
 Olyan, Saul 238

- Orient 280–281, 284, 285ⁿ13, 286ⁿ15, 287, 290, 305–306
- Osborne, Lauren 234–236
- Osman, Hafiz 174–175, 177, 258
- Özyazıcı, Mustafa Halim 258
- Palestine 84
- Pauliny, Ján 195
- Perrault, Charles 280ⁿ1, 284ⁿ8
- Petra 46
- Pharaoh (Feraoun, Fir'awn) 37, 49–51, 56, 58, 60, 68–69, 84, 87, 164, 168ⁿ7, 248–249, 251–252, 287, 295, 300
- Phelan, James 200
- Pilpay. *See* Aesop
- Plato 213, 218
- Pope 304
- Prophets. *See also* Aaron, Abraham, Adam, Ahijah, Christ, David, Hızır, Houd, İdris, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Jethro, Job, Jonah, Joseph, Lot, Moses, Muḥammad, Nathan, Noah, Şalih, Solomon, Zachariah
- Qābil. *See* Cain
- al-Qarāfi, Shihāb al-Dīn 20–21, 24, 27, 146ⁿ
- al-Qāsimī, Muḥammad Jamāl al-Dīn 71–72
- al-Qazwīnī, Ḥamd Allāh al-Muṣṭafawī 292ⁿ26, 293
- Tarikh Montekheb* 292
- Queen of Sheba (Bilqis) 3, 57, 70, 152, 154, 156–157, 159–160, 162, 164–165, 167, 168–169, 171, 174, 176, 179
- Qulī Naqqāsh (Shāh) 270
- Qūnawī, Ṣadr al-Dīn. *See* Kenaoui, Sadreddin
- Quraysh 60, 128ⁿ, 129
- al-Qurṭubī, Abū 'Abd Allāh 29, 136ⁿ, 156, 159, 160, 192–193
- al-Qushayrī, 'Abd al-Karīm ibn Hawāzin 19, 32
- Quṭb, Sayyid 198–199, 203
- Rahman, Fazlur 202
- Rākım, Mustafa 258
- Rashwani, Samer 1, 3, 8, 115, 185, 254
- al-Rāwandī, Quṭb al-Dīn 192
- Rawls, John 122–123, 125, 144ⁿ33, 145, 147
- al-Rāzī, Fakhr al-Dīn 18–19, 66–68, 83–84, 135, 156–160
- Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb* 66
- Red Sea 51, 87
- Reda, Nevin 159
- Reuel. *See* Jethro
- Reynolds, Gabriel S. 97ⁿ, 109, 133ⁿ15, 137, 152–153, 179–180, 284ⁿ8
- The Qur'ān and the Bible* 3, 137, 167
- Rheindorf, Markus 154
- Richardson, Kristina 238
- Ricoeur, Paul 200
- Riḍā, Muḥammad Rashid 32, 197–198, 203
- Rippin, Andrew 235–236, 244
- Rispler-Chaim, Vardit 235, 237ⁿ4, 238–239, 251
- Robert of Ketton 288, 289ⁿ21
- Rocky Tract (al-Ḥijr) 46, 82
- Roman Empire 130, 229ⁿ
- Rome 280
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 127ⁿ
- The Social Contract* 127ⁿ
- Roxburgh, David 267
- Rūmī 4, 210–211, 215ⁿ, 217–231, 300, 302
- Mathnawī (couplets)* 210–211, 215ⁿ, 218, 221–231, 300
- Saba' (Sheba) 3, 52, 57, 60, 70, 87, 152, 154, 156, 159–160, 162, 164–165, 167–169, 171–172, 174, 176, 179
- Sa'deddin Efendi, Müstakimzâde Süleyman 273–275
- Tuhfe-i Hattâtîn* 273
- Sa'di 284, 305
- Gulistân* 284–286, 305
- Saeed, Abdullah 97, 153–154
- al-Sa'fi, Wahid 11, 199
- al-'Ajib wa-l-Gharib fi Kutub al-Tafsir* 11
- Sahid, David 284ⁿ11
- Said, Edward 280
- Orientalism* 280
- Sa'id, Jawdat 9, 36
- Kun ka-Bni Ādam* 9
- Madhhab Ibn Ādam al-Awwal: Mushkilat al-Unffi al-Amal al-Islāmī* 9
- Şalih 46–47, 56–57, 191
- Madā'in ~ 46, 59

- Sâmi Efendi 258
 Sarah 103
 al-Sarrāj 211
 Schipper, Jeremy 238, 250
 Schmitt, Carl 120–121, 149n
 Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. *See* Aṣḥāb al-Kahf
 Şevki Efendi, Mehmed 258
 Shabistārī, Maḥmūd 230
 al-Shāfiʿī 189, 191, 212
 Shaḥrūr, Muḥammad 199
 Shaikh, Saʿdiyya 202
 El Shakry, Hoda 97, 201
 Sharīʿatī, ʿAlī 36
 al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā 27, 29–30, 194
 al-Sharqāwī, Aḥmad Muḥammad 199
 al-Shāṭibī, Ibrāhīm ibn Mūsā 28
 Sheba. *See* Sabaʾ
 Sherwood, Y. 133n15
 Shuʿayb. *See* Jethro
 Sicily 79
 Sinai 80n, 84, 85, 98, 100n, 102–103
 Sinān 260–261, 262n
 Snyder, Sharon D. 237
 Sodom 47, 49–50, 78
 Solomon 3, 57, 70, 152–154, 156–180
 Stefanidis, Emmanuelle 5, 279
 Stewart, Devin 2, 44, 58, 98, 200–201, 245n12, 254
 Stroumsa, Guy 130, 132n12
 Suhrawardī, Shihāb al-Dīn Maqtūl 211, 213
Ṭabwihāt 213
 Süleymaniye 262n
 Sunderland, Jane 154
 Suwāʿ 45
 Suyolcuẓāde, Mehmed Necīb 271n, 272–273
Devhatü'l Küttāb 272
 al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn 185, 195

 al-Ṭabarī 13–17, 22, 28, 69, 82, 187, 196, 293
Tārīkh 293, 293nn30–31
 al-Ṭaḥāwī, Abū Jaʿfar 189n3
 Ṭalḥa 101n
 Tamīm al-Dārī 186
 al-Ṭarafī, Ibn Muṭarrif 188
 Taylor, Charles 200
 Terah 289
 Teresa, of Avila 303–304

 al-Thaʿlabī, Ibn Ishāq 188, 201, 293, 293nn30–31, 294
ʿArāʾis al-Majālis fī Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ 188, 293
 Thamūd 46–47, 56–57, 60, 69, 77, 79, 82–84, 86, 195
 Tigris 225
 Tīmūr (Tamerlane) 281, 283
 Tottoli, Roberto 185–188
 Troy 128
 Trump 120
 al-Ṭūfi, Najm al-Dīn 17–19, 191
 Ṭunshuq al-Muẓaffariyya, al-Sitt 2, 93, 95–96, 112
 ~ tomb (turba) 112
 al-Ṭūsī, Abū Jaʿfar 13, 18, 24, 26, 29
 Ṭūsī, Firdawsī-yi 211, 217, 231
Shahnāma 211, 217–218, 231
 Ṭūsī, Naṣīr al-Dīn 210, 213, 217
Akhḫāq-i Nāṣirī 213
Awṣāf al-Ashraf 213
 al-Tustarī, ʿAbd Allāh 196, 213
 Ṭuwā 248

 ʿUmāra ibn Wathīma al-Fārsī 187
 ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān 133n13

 Voltaire 283, 306

 Wadd 45
 Wadud, Amina 178
 Wahn ibn Munabbih/ Wahn b. Munabbih 32, 187
Kitāb al-Mubtadaʾ wa-Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ 187
 Wannūs, Saʿd Allāh 37
 Wansbrough, John 58, 61
 Wāṣil b. ʿAṭāʾ 234, 254
 Webster, John 76
The Duchess of Malfi 76
 Witztum, Joseph Benzion 10, 13n, 103n
 Wodak, Ruth 154–155

 Yaghūth 45
 Yaʿqūb. *See* Jacob
 al-Yaʿqūbī 187
 Yāqūt al-Mustaʿsimī 258, 272
 Yaʿūq 45

Yemen 79, 156, 160, 290

Young, Serenity 167

Yūnus. *See* Jonah

Yūsuf. *See* Joseph

Zachariah 4, 241, 253, 288

al-Zamakhsharī, Maḥmūd b. 17–18, 156–160,
196

Zamzam well 128*n*

Zargar, Cyrus Ali 202, 211,

*The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the
Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy
and Sufism* 211

al-Zarkashī, Badr al-Dīn 185, 189

al-Ṣawāhirī, Kāẓim 199

Zilio-Grandi, Ida 11

Zulaykhā 5, 300

Zwettler, Michael 58, 201

Index of Terms

ability 4, 57, 64, 76, 109, 139n24, 158–160, 164, 172, 175–177, 234, 236, 238, 245, 248, 253–254, 270, 284, 286, 302
See also disability, inability
 abstinence 297–298
 academia 204
 western ~ 97
 acceptance (*qabūl*) 11, 16, 20–21, 25, 34, 37, 166, 226, 236, 252
 non- ~ 20
 plea for ~ 21
 accommodation 236, 240, 249, 251, 252
 accomplishments 59, 99, 173, 273
 accountability 30
 acquiescence 32
 action 13–14, 16–17, 19–21, 23, 25, 27, 30–32, 35, 68, 75, 99, 106, 112, 146, 155–156, 166–168, 192–194, 210–211, 216, 219–221, 226–228, 241, 245, 259, 286
 divine ~ 102, 111, 260–261
 right ~ 217, 224
 actors 39, 155–156, 169–170, 172–173, 176, 178, 211
 human and non-human ~ 173
 male and female ~ 155, 172, 178
 social ~ 154–157, 168, 172–173, 178
adab 112, 226, 228, 231
 admonishers (*wu‘āz*) 185
 admonishment 37, 54, 84, 195
 adultery 190
 advantage 121, 131n9, 143, 147
 adversaries 166, 185, 188
 adversity 35, 141
 aesthetic(s) 152, 258–260, 269–270, 273
 ~ characteristics 199
 literary ~ 198
 ~ traditions 259, 267
 affliction 202, 250, 300–301
 afterlife (hereafter) 16, 29, 31, 108–109
 aggression 13, 24–25, 50
 aggressor 18, 24–25
 agricultural land 47
 agriculture 80, 87
 Ahl al-Sunna 17
aḥqāf (sand dunes) 293n31

akeda. See doctrine
 commemoration of ~ 141
 alienation 251
 allegations 161, 165, 177, 179–180
 allegorical 198, 203
 ~ interpretation 297, 305
 ~ techniques 198
 allegory 9
 allusions 109, 153, 263–264
 alms. *See* charity
 compulsory ~ 16
 almsgiving 140n26
 altars 46
 altruism 126–127, 147
 ambiguity 15–16, 193, 250
 ambivalence 279, 283–284, 303
 amendment 111
 amenities 60, 101
 ancient nations. *See* ruins
 angels 48, 105, 135, 141n27, 158, 177, 198, 214, 227, 272, 289n21
 ~ in Babel. *See* Hārūt and Marūt in the Index of Names
 See also Hārūt and Marūt, Isrāfil, Jibril in the Index of Names
 anger 34, 290
 animals 57, 78, 80, 165, 177, 213–214
 ~ sacrifice as rituals 129–130
 ~ slaughtered regularly (*dhabiḥa*) 131
 ~ slaughtered as a sacrifice. *See* (*uḍḥiya* or *ḍaḥīyya*) 130–131, 139–141, 144n34, 145n
 See also apes, bird, calf, camel, elephant, ewe, fish, goats, horses, insects, mouse, ram, sheep, snake
 animosity 30, 34–35
 annihilation 2, 48, 52, 68–69, 74–75, 83
 anomaly 131
 anonymous authors 185
 ant 171, 175
 antagonism 241, 279
 anthropology 96, 240
 antiquity 79, 87, 128
 late ~ 102, 110, 129, 132–133
 anxiety 103, 240, 247, 249, 251

- apes 69
 aphorisms 301
 apocalyptic time 55
 Apostle 302
 appetite 220
 appraisal 172–173
 critical ~ 163
 negative ~ 175
 positive ~ 173
 self ~ 35
 appraisalment 156, 169
 apprehension 102, 203
 apprentice 258–259, 261, 266, 275
 apprenticeship 258–259
 appropriateness 95, 141, 226
‘āqiba (end, outcome) 73–75, 85
‘āqibat al-dār (the fate of the abode) 75, 85
 Arabian tales 283
 Arabic 36, 52, 54, 63, 107, 133*m*3, 134*m*6, 139*n*24, 160, 185, 187, 202, 212*n*, 234, 247, 267, 280–282, 286*m*5, 291, 301
 classical ~ 134*m*6, 155
 Arabs 52–53, 59, 61, 79, 110, 225, 229*n*, 283, 290
 pagan ~ 142*n*29
 pre-Islamic ~ 139*n*24, 140*n*26
 archaeological 44
 ~ evidence 68, 87
 ~ remains 71, 87
 ~ sites 79
 archaeology 80, 88
 architect 96, 260–261
 Supreme ~ 261
 architecture 1–2, 96, 112, 174, 260–261, 269
 arguments (debates) 9–10, 13*n*, 14, 17–18, 21–24, 26, 32, 39, 45, 58, 60, 98, 106, 123, 124, 189, 190, 195, 202, 221–222, 224, 235, 289, 290*n*22, 304*n*46, 305
 Ark of the Covenant 161, 165, 167
 Ark of Noah 45–46, 51, 63, 78, 86
 armor 57, 165
 army 50–51, 158, 165, 175, 290
 arrogance 9, 44, 50, 52, 60, 88, 157
 art 1, 5, 38, 96, 198, 216, 229, 235, 257, 259–261, 266, 268–276
 narrative ~ 199
 scribal ~ 5, 257, 268, 272–275
aṣḥāb al-muwāfāt 20
ashāb-ī hutūt u aklām (the brethren of calligraphy and the pen, *erbāb-ī kitābet ü erkām*) 259, 274
 Ash'arīs 189
Āshūra (Yom Kippur) 190, 19*m*8
 aspirations 33, 38, 96, 134
 assailant 24–25
 assault 10
 assimilation 156, 168, 171, 177, 226, 333
 association 156, 168, 170, 235–236, 246–247, 253, 285
 astrologers 83
 astronomy 68, 80
at̤lāl (traces of the deserted campsite) 61
 attack 23, 143, 195
 attacker 23
 audience 45–46, 49, 53–54, 58–60, 62–63, 66, 68, 71, 75, 78–79, 87, 97–99, 103, 112, 115, 153, 169, 176, 180, 200, 234, 239, 244, 284, 291
 contemporary ~ 46, 48–49, 59, 72, 75, 85
 auditory reception 65
 authenticity 186, 194
 authoritarian 125–126, 146, 175
 autism 240, 254
 autonomy 175, 201, 300
 avarice 230
awliyā' (friends of God) 213
āyat al-mūthāq (verse of the covenant) 299
ayyām Allāh (Th battles of God) 61
ayyām al-'Arab (the tribal battles of the Arabs) 61
 balance (*i'tidāl*) 36, 107, 215, 219
 banquet. *See* feast
Basmala (in the name of Allāh) 157, 170, 273
 battle 61, 143*n*32, 165, 283
 beauty 15, 101, 159, 258, 263, 273
 beggar 141*n*27
 behavior 2, 34, 44, 54, 58, 61, 81, 84, 87, 101, 102, 111–112, 218
 belief 18, 21–22, 26, 32, 36, 51, 53, 54, 57, 101, 103, 109, 111, 128, 153, 172, 201–202, 270, 281, 288–289, 294*n*, 295, 300, 303, 305
 believer 13, 16, 19, 25, 27, 51, 53, 57, 69, 74, 83–86, 100–101, 103, 105, 108, 112, 127, 167–168, 171, 178, 186, 188, 199, 218, 265, 268, 272, 300–301
 non- ~ 186, 199, 234, 242

- beneficiaries 155
- benefit 14, 20, 28, 36, 66–67, 72, 96, 139, 143*n*31, 147, 154, 191, 217, 231
- benevolence 33–34, 44, 188
- bias. *See* prejudice
- Bible 3, 14, 56, 152–153, 161–167, 169–175, 180, 199, 280, 289
 - Hebrew ~ 3, 106, 110, 125, 127–128, 132*m*13, 133, 144–146, 154, 160, 167, 179, 238, 250, 280
- Biblical
 - ~ archetype 139
 - ~ counterparts 5, 154, 288, 305
 - ~ customs 110
 - ~ figures 132
 - ~ history 55–57
 - ~ law 110, 130
 - ~ patriarch 289
 - ~ stories 126*n*4
 - ~ studies 11, 200
 - ~ texts 109
 - ~ traditions 133*m*15, 153, 200, 306
- bioethics 5
- biographical 259, 262, 267, 269, 283
 - ~ dictionaries 257, 260–262, 270, 272–273, 275–276
 - ~ entries 269, 273–275
 - ~ genre 262
- biography 212, 250, 275, 293
- bird 5, 57, 157, 159, 162, 164–165, 169, 171–172, 177, 197, 228–229, 231, 290, 297*n*, 298
 - See also* animals, crow, dove, eagle, Hoopoe, Hudhud, peacock, pigeon, rooster
- birth 102, 159, 166–167, 223, 287, 289
- bitterness 93, 100–101
- blame 34, 223, 235
- blasphemy 222
- blessing 2, 14, 33, 35, 44, 52, 60, 83, 88, 113, 134–136, 165, 167, 228, 252, 260, 272, 275
- blind 73, 235, 238, 244, 245*m*13
- blindness 235, 236, 239, 243–246
- bliss 105, 298
- blood 3, 12, 24*n*, 126, 138–139, 140, 140*n*26, 141, 148, 212, 224–226
 - debt of ~ 29
 - shedding of ~ 34, 138*n*22
 - ~ ties 101
- bondage 101, 220
- Book. *See* Qurʾān
 - ~ of the Arabs. *See* Qurʾān
 - ~ of Genesis 50, 187
 - ~ of Kings 162
 - ~ of Kings and Chronicles 160, 164
- borrowing 154, 200
- botany 68, 80
- bounty 35, 112, 148, 173, 215*n*
- bravery 143*n*31, 211, 283
- breastfeeding 250–251
- breasts 73, 93, 100, 230, 251
- brimstone 82
- brother 2, 9–10, 12, 16–18, 20, 22–23, 26–28, 30–37, 93, 100–101, 110*n*, 111, 163, 212, 249–250, 252, 303
 - false ~ 13*n*
 - righteous ~ 28
- brotherhood 101, 138
- burden 31–31, 131, 245, 251
- burial 14
- burning bush 4, 236, 237*n*7, 247–248
- bypassers 193
- calf 102, 245
- caliph 133*m*13, 225, 274, 283
- calligrapher(s) 258–259, 261–262, 267–270, 271*n*, 273–275
 - ʿAbbāsīd ~ 258
 - apprentice ~ 266
 - biographical dictionaries of ~ 257, 260–261, 270, 272–273, 276
 - court ~ 258
 - master ~ 258–259, 261–262, 271, 275
 - Ottoman ~ 5, 257–260, 266*n*, 272, 276
- calligraphic
 - ~ arts 261, 266, 269, 273
 - ~ knowledge 265
 - ~ lore 269
 - ~ narratives 269
 - ~ practice 261, 275
 - ~ texts 264
- calligraphy 4–5, 257–266, 267*n*, 268–276
 - art of ~ 260–261, 271, 275
 - brethren of ~ (*ehl-i hatt*) 259, 274
 - ethics of ~ 274
 - Islamic ~ 269, 276
 - Ottoman ~ 4, 257, 259, 260*n*, 262, 266*n*, 267, 276

- calligraphy (*cont.*)
 science of ~ 263–264, 274
 treatises on ~ 257, 260–262, 264*n*, 266*n*,
 271*n*
- camel 78, 128, 139*n*24, 141, 174, 220
 sacrificial ~ 140
 she- ~ 191
- campsite 61, 78
- caprice 2, 33
- caravan 174
- carpentry 261
- castles 47
- catalyst 9
- categorization 169–170
- cathedral 290
- Catholic
 ~ Church 130
 ~ debates 305
 ~ mysticism 303
 ~ revival 283, 303, 305
 ~ world 303
- Catholicism 280
- Catholics 289
- cave 70, 87, 218
 Men of the ~ 218
 people of the ~ 192
 sleepers in the ~ 87
- celestial spheres 66
- censorship 279
- centrality 82, 128, 201, 234, 260
- challenge 26, 125, 152, 172, 187, 195, 203, 235,
 242, 286, 296
 social ~ 250
 theological ~ 304
- chapel 87
- character 11, 31, 34–35, 37–38, 81–82, 86–87,
 121, 153, 161, 173, 178–179, 186, 201, 211,
 216, 241, 269–270, 273–274, 283, 286,
 293, 298, 300
 female ~ 167–168
 human ~ 215
- charity (alms) 16, 33, 35, 106–107, 130,
 141*n*27, 302
- chauvinistic conception 127
- cheating 86
- child, children 34, 78, 106, 128–129, 143, 240,
 287
 ~ of Adam 142, 299
 ~ of God 136*n*, 142*n*
 half-human ~ 159
 ~ of Israel. *See* the index of names and
 places
- Chinese 229, 231
- chivalry 2, 33–34
- chosen 57, 100, 126, 138, 146, 177, 252
 ~ messengers/ prophets 58, 268
 ~ son 127
- chosenness 125–127
 ~ of Abraham 136
- Christian
 ~ community 110
 ~ hospitality 106
 ~ polemics 282, 288, 305
 ~ republic 127*n*
- Christianity 101, 128–130, 132*m*11, 138, 286,
 289*n*22, 296, 301–303
- Christians 11, 14, 39, 68, 110, 136*n*, 142*n*, 186,
 190*n*5, 301–302
- chroniclers 234, 262
- chronicles 1, 61, 75
- chronologists 289
- chronology 45, 49, 56–57, 87, 289
- church 101, 127, 129–130, 138, 148, 290,
 304–305
- circumcision 137
- cities 46–49, 69, 72–73, 76, 78, 82–84, 93,
 104–105, 192
- citizenry 123
- citizens 121, 123–125, 127, 144*n*33, 146–148
- citizenship 238
- civilization(s) 44, 52, 59–60, 71, 82, 88, 149,
 279, 284
 ancient ~. *See* ruins
 contemporary ~ 2, 88
 destroyed ~ 58
 Islamic/ Muslim ~ 279–281, 283,
 306
- clan. *See* tribe
- cleanliness 137
- clemency 2, 33
- clouds 290, 292–293
- co-existence 105
- cognition 234
- coherence 14, 19, 39, 168, 178, 200
- Cold War 120
- columns (pillars) 46, 157, 270

- command 15, 20, 54, 65, 67, 70–71, 74, 79, 111, 122, 125, 130, 132*n*13, 134–135, 137–138, 146, 149, 162, 192, 201, 248, 252, 263–264
 - divine ~. *See* divine: command
- commandment 104, 106, 111–112, 130
- commentaries 11–12, 21, 66, 98*n*, 100*n*, 126*n*4, 136*n*, 139*n*24, 158, 180, 188, 195–196, 200, 253, 260, 273, 289, 292*n*28
 - scriptural ~ 269, 272
- commentators 14, 18, 27, 31, 50–51, 67–71, 137, 290
- commitment 99, 101, 123–124, 142, 145, 163, 171, 178, 276, 302*n*42
- communication 44, 61, 80–81, 236, 240, 244, 251, 253
 - ~ differences 235–236
 - ~ difficulty 251
 - ~ disability 252–253
 - divine-human ~ 111
 - oral/aural ~ 236, 244–245
- communitas* 101
- community, communities (*Umma*) 23, 34, 58, 85, 96, 98, 100–101, 112, 126, 129, 136*n*, 138–139, 142–143, 148, 152, 153, 173, 176, 179, 188, 194, 236, 237*n*7, 239–247, 251, 259, 274
 - chosen ~ 126
 - Christian ~ 110
 - Jewish ~ 110, 253
 - Muslim ~ 4, 14, 196, 201, 235, 240, 254
 - political ~ 126, 147
 - religious ~ 111
- companions 13, 186, 189, 218
 - ten ~ ('*ashara al-mubashshara*) 101*n*
- comparative
 - ~ analysis 10
 - ~ approach 179
 - ~ study 5, 97, 267
- compassion 37–38, 111–112, 248
- compensation 29
- competition 33, 34, 229, 231
- complaint 218, 221, 231, 250
- comprehension 4, 22, 53, 62, 64–65, 80, 203
- conceptualization 198, 234
- concordance 10
- concupiscence 297–298
- condemnation 14, 35, 142*n*, 167, 305
 - papal ~ 304
- confidence 58, 170
- conflicts 15, 24, 32, 36, 98, 105, 127, 138, 147
- confrontation 9, 34, 56, 248
- connotations 22, 189, 231
- consecrated state (*iḥrām*) 131
- consensus 153
- construction 59, 74, 85, 164–165, 171, 178, 243, 246, 261, 267
- contemplation 10, 66, 71, 77, 79, 221, 294*n*, 295–296, 304*n*45
- contemporaries 47, 50, 76, 78, 85, 87, 262*n*, 275
- contentment (*riḍā*) 25, 27
- context
 - Arabian ~ 240, 246
 - historical ~ 98, 106
 - literary ~ 111
 - sociocultural ~ 153, 176
 - spiritual ~ 262
 - theological ~ 270
- continence 214, 297–298
- controversy 303–304
- conundrums 2, 11, 202
- convent 218
- conversation 171, 213, 223, 237, 237*n*7, 249
- conversion 158, 160, 171, 174–175, 179
- conviction 96, 174, 269
- cooperation 144*n*33, 148
- Alcoranistes* 282
- corruption 16, 32, 74, 81, 177
- cosmogony 257, 264, 273, 275
- courage 211, 214, 216–217, 220
- covenant 5, 14, 34, 39, 55, 127, 133, 136, 142, 143, 145, 161, 165, 167, 299
 - God's ~ 138, 141
 - divine ~. *See* divine: covenant
 - preternatural ~ 148–149
 - primordial ~ 5, 55, 145, 299
 - transgenerational ~ 135–136
- covenantal
 - ~ bond 148
 - ~ community 126, 138
- cowardice 214, 220
- craft 45, 78, 258, 260, 262*n*, 263
- craftsmanship 72

- creation 53, 55, 64, 66, 97, 99, 101, 132*m*3,
147–148, 158, 201, 231, 257, 263–264,
267–268, 271–273, 288, 289*n*21, 292*n*2,
295, 296
divine ~ 273, 275
~ of Earth 198
~ narrative 197, 263, 266, 268
creature(s) 5, 84, 107, 111, 159, 164, 223, 295
creed 103, 224, 289
crime 12, 14, 18, 22, 25, 26–29, 30*n*8, 31, 290
critical
~ reading 237
~ study 275
~ thinking 171
criticism 37, 99, 107, 122, 133*m*14, 142*n*, 196,
200, 286
historical ~ 195, 197, 290*n*22
critics 120, 200–201, 269
critique 36, 112, 130, 132, 175, 224, 253
liberal ~ 124
literary ~ 185, 198
crops 12, 142*n*
crow 229, 298
crucifixion of Jesus 25*n*
Cry 104
cultivation 87
cults 129
culture 78, 96, 110, 155, 237, 280, 281*n*7,
285*m*3, 286
Muslim ~ 195, 280
curiosity 170, 279, 282, 285
- dam 52, 78, 87
damage. *See* harm
danger 105
darkness 244, 245*m*3, 268, 302
Darwin's theory 197
daughter 104, 106, 128, 164, 191–193, 223
Day
~ of Judgement 30, 55, 57, 68, 110*m*10,
138*n*21, 245*m*3, 264, 271–272, 274
~ of Recompense 249
~ of Resurrection and Reckoning 34, 53,
55, 142, 299
Days of *Tashriq* 191*n*9
the dead 53, 228–229
deaf 235, 240, 143, 245*m*3, 246, 253–254
deafness 4, 65, 235–236, 239–240, 243–247,
252–253
See also disability
- death 2, 11, 14, 24–25, 28, 37, 76, 108, 113, 122,
128, 130, 136*n*, 143, 161, 166–167, 177, 260,
265, 281, 285, 290, 304
debate. *See* arguments
debts 20, 29, 281*n*5
deceit 13
deception 172, 176
decrees 25, 130
deeds
evil ~ 47, 51
good ~ 19–20, 30–31, 39, 177
valid ~ 21
defense 23–24, 101, 105, 133*m*14, 194
self- ~ 2, 18, 23–25, 38
defenselessness 100
deficiencies 65, 153, 159, 203, 243
deity 140, 146, 170, 249, 294*n*
delegation 291, 293
deliberation 134*m*16, 144–146
deliverance 51
delusions 100
democracy 3, 120, 125, 145
democratic
~ citizen 125
~ polity 122–124
~ politics 123–124
~ rationality 122
~ society 123
demonic 124, 127, 144
~ whispering 124
~ will 125
dependence 99, 237
descendant 34, 55–56, 126*n*4, 129, 135, 138,
146, 213, 243, 299
~ of Adam 14, 32
biological ~ 138
spiritual ~ 129, 138
desert 78, 158, 225
desire 26, 29, 32–34, 128*n*, 157, 163, 170,
228–229, 247, 251, 280, 297–298
despair 26, 95, 102–103, 248
destiny 99, 134*m*16, 227
destruction 36, 44, 47, 49, 51–52, 60, 68–70,
72–77, 81–85, 87, 104–105, 120, 126,
140–141, 142*n*, 144*n*34, 145–146, 148, 167,
243, 291–293, 295
~ of Second Temple 129–130
devil (Iblis, Satan, al-Shayṭān) 17, 31, 33–35,
100, 111, 174, 177, 201, 226–227, 251, 272,
289*n*21

devilishness 37
 devotion 15, 44, 81, 127, 165, 220, 249, 301
 Dhū l-Ḥijja 141n28
 dialect 250
 dialogue 37, 103, 154, 192, 198, 200, 237,
 241–242, 248–250, 252–253
 dichotomy 86, 186n, 242
 didactics 211
 differences
 cognitive ~ 238–239
 physical ~ 235, 238–239
 differentiation 156, 168
 dignity 129
 dilemma 3, 10–11, 23, 27–28, 125n, 126, 145
 directives
 Qurʾānic ~ 107
 topical scrutiny ~ 82
 topographical scrutiny ~ 71
 disability 1, 4, 235–240, 243–247, 249–254
 ~ ethic 234, 240
 ~ imagery 235–236, 239, 244
 people with ~ (*ahl al-ʾāḥāt*) 235
 ~ rhetoric 4, 234
 speech ~ 250, 253
 See also blind, deaf, dumb, lame, mute
 disasters 88
 disbelief (unbelief) 14, 18, 26, 70, 83–84,
 100, 161–162, 169–170, 172, 177, 228, 291,
 235, 246–247, 253
 disbelievers (*kuffār*, polytheist, unbelievers)
 17–19, 27, 49, 57, 60, 70, 74–75, 78,
 84–86, 128, 166, 177
 disciples 9, 108–109, 196, 197, 269, 304
 discipline 96, 137, 185, 213, 261
 discourse 9, 14, 38, 44, 87, 97, 154–156,
 179, 189, 192, 202, 234–235, 237–238,
 242, 248–249, 253, 257, 260, 270, 280,
 297
 Foucauldian ~ 155
 Qurʾān's ~ 2, 52, 61–62, 65, 86, 234–235,
 237, 245–246, 253, 294
 ruins ~ 73, 75, 80, 85
 signs ~ 45, 52, 61–62, 65–66
 discovery 128n, 172, 284, 286
 disobedience 18, 26, 32, 35, 73, 125, 289n21,
 291
 dispute 15, 17, 32, 127, 146n, 202, 237n7,
 242–243, 289–290, 304–305
 distress 100, 247–252, 293

divergence 10
 diversity 158, 216, 239
 divine
 ~ abundance 107
 ~ advice 37
 ~ appraisal 173
 ~ approval 193
 ~ benevolence 188
 ~ command 20, 105, 134–135, 190, 249,
 289n21
 ~ covenant 14, 133, 142, 145
 ~ decree 25
 ~ demand 106
 ~ empowerment 162–165, 174
 ~ favor 33–34, 129, 140
 ~ -human relationship 99
 ~ intervention 102, 106
 ~ intimacy 302
 ~ laws 15, 19, 25
 ~ light 267
 ~ message 103, 245
 ~ mysteries 265
 ~ orders 268
 ~ prophecy 149
 ~ proximity 39
 ~ punishment 104, 240, 291
 ~ transcription 268
 ~ union 300, 305
 ~ volition (*mashīʾa*) 27
 ~ will (*irāda*) 27, 290
 divinity 87, 244
 doctrine (*akeda*) 3, 9, 17–18, 120–121, 123,
 126–129, 131, 133–134, 136–138, 141,
 143–148, 193–194, 286, 289, 303–304
 dogma 17, 38–39, 195, 286
 domestic order 126
 dominion 14, 126, 139–140
 earthly ~ 136
 doom 2, 294
 doubt 76, 102–103, 125, 160, 210
 dove 298
 downfall 44, 60–61, 83, 88, 105, 166
 dream 128n, 134–135, 146, 213
 false ~ 241
 drink 110n, 191, 227
 drought 291
 dumb 235n1, 247
 duty 2, 68, 82, 109, 111, 210, 223, 260
 dwellers. *See* inhabitants

- dwellings (*masākin*) 46–47, 77–78, 82, 85,
 101
 empty ~ 47
 rock ~ 46
 dynasties 281
- eagle 298*n*38
 ears 45, 63–65, 73, 80, 194, 215*n*
 earth 12, 29, 33, 45, 55, 60–61, 64, 66–67, 69,
 71, 75, 77, 84, 88, 100, 107, 135, 142, 158,
 164, 198, 221, 230, 241–242, 247, 261,
 295
 ease 247, 249, 251–252
 education 1, 5, 153, 211, 271*n*, 273
 Egyptian(s) 50–51, 79, 84–85, 139*n*23, 146*n*,
 192, 300
 ~ edifices 50
 elephant 290
 elite 175, 194, 284, 304
 eminence 228–229
 emotional 201, 279, 293
 ~ distress/suffering 251
 empathy 9, 37, 282
 empowerment 3, 161–165, 174, 179
 enemy 69, 78, 108, 143–144
 enlightenment 5, 264, 273, 282, 306
 enslavement 280
 envoys 95, 102, 105, 293
 envy 2, 14, 31, 33–35, 38
 epigraphy 96
 epilogue 265
 epistemological 3, 185, 258, 266, 275
 ~ fabric 5, 264, 276
 epistemology 61, 260, 276
 epitomes 2, 33, 289, 193, 198
 equality 16, 168, 215
 equilibrium 4, 31
erbāb-ī kitābet ü erkām (masters of scribal
 activity and writing). *See ashāb-ī hutūt u*
 aklām
 erring 100
 error 73, 193, 230, 241–242, 291, 302
 ethical
 ~ behavior 112
 ~ complexities 29
 ~ dilemma 10–11, 27–28
 ~ implications 3, 5, 11, 52, 98, 235
 ~ obligation 4, 44, 54, 88, 106, 254
 ~ paradigm 2, 44, 87
 ~ principles 4, 30, 106, 257, 260, 266
 ~ reasoning 4, 257
 ~ responsibility 259, 275
 ~ teachings 132*n*13
 ~ values 1, 98, 107, 199, 275
 ~ virtue 97, 101, 106
 ethics 1–2, 4, 23, 38, 96–99, 104, 106, 111–112,
 115, 200, 202, 210–213, 215, 218, 228,
 231–232, 234, 239, 257, 259, 260–261,
 268–270, 272–276, 306
 Islamic ~ 65, 96, 112
 Qur'anic Narrative ~ 2, 4, 93, 97–98
 ethnocracy 126
 Eucharist 109, 130
 eulogy (obituary) 280, 280*n*
 evil 2, 11, 26–34, 37–38, 47, 51, 66, 74, 86, 100,
 111, 132*n*13, 174, 177, 227–229
 lesser ~ 24
 evildoers 49
 evolutions 11, 199, 201, 203, 286*n*15
 ewe 163
 exaltation 163, 165, 168, 173
 exegesis, exegeses 10, 14, 31, 187, 192, 238,
 271–272, 292, 305
 Muslim ~ 11, 101*n*, 133*n*15, 137
 scriptural ~ 5, 257, 276
 exegete 1, 11, 13, 17–18, 22, 26, 28–29, 31,
 157–160, 169, 187–188, 193, 195–196,
 292*n*28, 297*n*
 Mālikī ~ 192
 Muslim ~ 134, 136*n*, 166, 177, 236*n*, 240,
 250
 Mu'tazilī ~ 192
 premodern ~ 238
 Sufī ~ 196
 exhortation 3, 112, 186
 exodus 84, 248
 Book of ~ 250
 exoticism 283, 285
 expenditures 18
 extra-biblical sources 1, 200
 extra-Qur'anic 12, 19, 38, 188–189, 202, 287
 ~ literature 10
 ~ narration 11, 14, 22, 35, 37, 195
 ~ narratives 15, 196
 extremes 127, 213–216, 219–220, 225, 229,
 231

eye(s) 55, 59, 63–64, 73, 80, 101, 165, 210,
215*n*, 221, 229–230, 238, 241, 244, 250,
265, 285

fables 28*m*3, 282–290, 297

failure 9, 52, 73, 195, 242–243

faith 17, 44, 74, 96, 101, 109, 120, 122–123,
125, 132*m*3, 145, 148–149, 153, 160, 167,
170–171, 173–175, 178–179, 188, 228, 244,
295, 301
Islamic ~ 294
monotheistic ~ 160, 174–176
universal ~ 303

fallacy 3

fallibility 193

fame 70, 163, 170–171, 173, 270

family 24, 38, 48, 101, 104, 107, 145*n*, 168*m*0,
212, 215, 248–249, 294
righteous ~ 215–216

fanaticism 34

fantasy 214

fast, fasting 16, 20, 190–191, 239, 251

fatalism 295

fate (*qadar*) 9, 13, 25, 57–58, 60, 73–75, 85,
87, 106, 293
~ of the abode 85

father 12, 35, 109*n*8, 110*n*, 126–129, 132*m*11,
134–135, 136*n*, 139, 156, 161, 163, 166, 191,
196, 229, 237*n*7, 241–242, 246, 262*n*,
271*n*, 288*m*9, 289

father-in-law 49, 287

father-son relationship 127, 199

favor 13, 33–34, 52, 60, 69, 83–84, 126,
129–130, 138*n*21, 140, 142*n*, 148, 162, 169,
171, 177, 195, 217, 288

fear 12, 35, 37, 47, 75, 101, 102–103, 105, 108,
142*n*, 192, 245, 249, 265
~ of God. *See* piety

feast (banquet, earthly meal, 'Īds) 101, 108,
138, 191*n*9
~ of the Sacrifice ('Īd al-Aḍḥā) 138,
141*n*28, 147
~ of the (Slaughter) of Sacrificial
Animals 130, 139

female 139*n*23, 155–156, 167–168, 172, 175,
178, 238
~ monarch 169–170
~ political leadership 169

feminism 202

feminist ethics 202

festival 101, 108–109, 130

fidelity 13, 81

fight 24, 30, 37, 143, 303

figurative 193, 235, 250, 253

figures 55, 58, 106, 110, 133, 154, 179, 186–188,
201–203, 241, 269, 281–283, 287
biblical ~ 132
prophetic vs non-prophetic ~ 153, 176,
179, 198
~ of speech 267

fiqh. *See* jurisprudence

firāsa and qiyāfa 78

fire 12, 16, 82, 137, 143, 162, 224, 242–244,
248

Fire. *See* hell

fish 51, 159, 230

flaws 194

flesh 139–141

flood 46, 51–52, 82

fluency 4, 234, 236, 253

foes 84, 135, 185

folklore 10, 38, 195

followers 30*n*8, 36, 108, 138, 189, 194, 240,
292

food 102, 108–110, 140, 227–228
earthly ~ 102
heavenly ~ 109

forbearance 2, 33, 198

forefathers 46, 299

forgery 279

forgiveness 13, 163, 227, 281, 301*n*41

fortresses 46

frailty 201

fraternal
~ conflict/ dispute 15, 37
~ relationship/ ties 37–38

fratricide 13*n*, 15, 34–35

French Catholic Revival 283, 303

friendship 146, 219, 298

functionalization 168–169

garden(s) 47, 100
~ owners 193
two ~ 87

Garden(s). *See* heaven
~ of Eden 45, 55

- gender 139n23, 155, 160, 172, 176, 178, 237n6, 138
- genealogy 133, 267, 289
- generosity 35, 106–107, 111, 166, 216, 283
- Genesis 50, 78, 105–106, 122, 126n4, 134–135, 137, 147, 186n, 187, 200
- genre
- historical ~ 188
 - literary ~ 1, 4–5, 61, 188, 197, 199, 203, 262
 - qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* ~ 305
- geography 68, 80, 281n7
- gestures 4, 254
- al-ghayb* (the Unseen) 63, 87, 161
- gift 33, 44, 57, 60, 83, 88, 96, 163–164, 174, 176, 225, 258, 263
- glass 274
- ~ flooring 70, 159–160
 - ~ Palace 156, 159–160, 164, 175
- glorification 224, 295
- glory 46, 59, 265, 270
- gluttony 298
- goats 222
- gods 45, 50, 52, 128, 142n, 164, 166, 174, 241–243, 245
- See also idols
- goddess 128
- gold 157, 174, 225, 281n6
- goodness 31, 108, 191, 301
- Gospel of John 109
- Gospels 132
- gossip 273
- governments 157, 216
- despotic ~ 284
- grace 33n, 95–96, 103, 163, 210, 221, 302
- grammarians
- Arab ~ 53
 - Arabic ~ 29
- Grand siècle (Great Century) 282, 285n13
- grandfather 128, 212
- gratitude 3, 35, 39, 44, 60, 88, 115, 139–141, 147–148, 160, 163, 167, 177–179
- greed (*ifrāṭ*) 5, 177, 214–216, 220, 228–230
- See also sluggishness
- Greek(s) 128–129, 229, 231, 285, 302
- guests (visitors) 59, 93, 101–107, 109–110, 245, 293
- celestial ~ 300
- guidance 19, 22, 68, 69, 85, 165, 190, 194, 197, 203, 248, 282, 304
- guilty 30n8, 46, 243
- habits 98, 110, 218, 221
- ḥadīth*. See traditions
- canonical ~ 33
 - ~ collections 186
 - ~ narrators 193
 - ~ scholars 186n, 196
- hady, budn, or nusuk. See udḥiya or ḍaḥiyya
- hagiography 187, 275
- Hajj*, *hajj*. See pilgrimage
- Ḥanafis 189
- Ḥanbalis 189
- ḥarām* 240
- hardship 141n27, 247, 251
- harm (damage) 23–25, 27–28, 35, 106, 243–244, 286
- harvesting 193
- hashish 270
- Ḥashwiyya. See muḥaddithūn
- hatred 14, 230
- hearing 4, 21, 63–65, 67, 170–171, 222, 234, 235n2, 236, 240, 244–246, 252–253, 291
- heart 16–17, 26, 35, 63–65, 71, 73, 80, 88, 108, 139–140, 194, 210, 221, 225, 229–230, 294, 300, 302
- heaven (Garden) 12, 47, 64, 66, 69, 77, 105, 107–109, 135, 142n, 158, 188, 221, 230, 240–242, 243n11, 247, 261, 273, 290, 295
- heir 47, 84–85, 107, 138, 166, 212
- Hell (Fire) 10, 12, 14, 25–26, 30, 74, 99, 295
- Hellfire 14
- helplessness 244
- hereafter. See afterlife
- heretical 282, 301, 303
- ~ traditions 305
- heretics 289
- hermeneutics 1, 4–5, 38, 192–193
- heroes 188
- hesitation 103–104
- hierarchy 38, 130, 146
- highway 48–49, 76, 139
- ḥikma*. See wisdom
- hills 12, 46, 162, 164, 228, 297
- Hindu 55, 168n6

historians 133, 187, 193, 267*n*, 292*n*27
 Muslims ~ 187
 ~ of religion 130–131
 historicity 186, 198–199, 247
 history 10, 32, 44–46, 55–58, 60, 68, 72,
 75, 78–81, 83, 86, 88, 96, 111, 120, 123,
 132*n*13, 140*n*25, 153, 185, 187, 195–196,
 198–199, 201, 203, 211–212, 217, 237, 257,
 262, 269, 280, 281*n*7, 287, 290, 292*n*26,
 293, 301
 Islamic ~ 257
 reception ~ 1, 3, 5, 185, 203
 salvation ~ 44–45, 49, 55–58, 63, 79, 86,
 88
 homicide 34
 honesty 81
honnêteté sociability 285*n*13
 honor 14, 105, 129, 159, 188, 268–270, 272,
 275
 Hoopoe (Hudhud) 157–158, 169, 172, 175
 hope 46, 53–54, 96, 103, 111, 123–124, 130,
 298*n*, 304
 horses 163
 hospitality 2, 96, 98, 101–107, 109–113,
 293–294
 Christian ~ 106, 110
 divine ~ 2, 93, 95, 100–101, 105, 107, 109,
 113
 human ~ 2, 93, 95, 109
 Qur'anic ~ 106, 111–112
 host 11, 101–102, 105–110, 293
 hostage 175
 hostility 281, 283, 296
 Hour 53–55, 249
 House. *See* Ka'ba
 household 47–48
 houses 47, 108
 Hudhud. *See* Hoopoe
hujja (proof) 158
 humanism 131, 305
 humanity 36, 46, 55, 107, 112, 120, 128, 137,
 140–142, 145, 148, 199, 283, 299, 303
 humility 3, 88, 179
 humor 219, 283
 hunger 108, 109
 hyperbole 80
 hypocrisy 36, 294, 296
 hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) 17, 86

Iblīs, Iblīs. *See* devil
'ibra. *See* lessons
 icon polemics 238
 ideals 120, 144
 identification 103, 168–169, 171, 176, 178, 188,
 230, 285
 identity 97, 120, 123, 127, 133*n*15, 134, 138, 156,
 168–169, 173, 175, 178, 188, 239, 250, 253,
 259, 269
 ideologies 238
 idleness 14
 idol(s) 73, 166, 236, 238, 240–246, 252
 ~ polemics 240, 244
 ~ worshippers 166
 See also gods
 idolatry 124, 242–243
 'Īds. *See* Feast
'ifrit (stalwart) 158
 ignorance 16, 38, 65, 140*n*26, 220
 learned ~ 303
 veil of ~ 16, 122–123, 145, 148
ihrām. *See* consecrated state
ijtihād 65
 Iliad 128
 ill-treatment 34
 illumination 257
 illusion 19, 36, 174–176
 image 29, 36, 75, 100–101, 107–108, 109*n*9,
 112, 154, 159, 166, 173, 189, 193, 229,
 241–243, 298
 imagery 198, 235–237, 239, 240, 245, 251
 imagination 38, 77, 128, 133, 220, 284, 287, 305
 imam, *imām* 50*n*, 192, 194
 ~ for humanity 137
 ~ for mankind 136–137
 Immaculate Conception 289
 immortality 107
 immunity. *See* infallibility
 impairments 238, 243
 impediment 192
 imperative 67, 71, 112, 153*n*, 245
 impersonalization 168
 implications 1, 5, 11, 17, 49, 55, 60, 62, 66, 68,
 77–80, 192, 202–203, 211
 ethical. *See* ethical: implications
 intricate ~ 38
 moral. *See* moral: implications
 normative ~ 192–193

- impostor 281, 288, 296
 impurity 223
 inability 65, 234–236, 243–246, 252–253
 incense 166
 incisiveness 217
 independence 175
 individuality 148
 indulgence 226
 ineloquence 250
 infallibility (immunity, *ʿiṣma*) 58, 189,
 193–195, 197, 203
 infancy 16, 248, 250
 infant 142*n*, 251
 infidel 222, 296
 informality 249
 ingratitude 35, 44, 52, 60, 88, 163
 inhabitants (dwellers) 78, 105
 ~ of the cities 72, 104–105
 ~ of the Fire/ Hell 12, 25–26
 ~ of Tanglewood 49
 inheritance 84–85, 219
 inhospitality 112
 injustice 13, 25, 35–37, 192, 202, 214–215,
 223–224
 ink 261, 272
 inkpot 273
 innocent 12, 25, 106
 insects 12, 165
 See also animals
 inspiration 9, 36, 78, 87, 167–168, 187, 198,
 258, 282
 institutions 123, 145, 148, 238–239, 246
 instructions 10, 14, 38, 61, 71–72, 87, 98, 192,
 266, 268, 285
 integrity 270, 305
 intellect 5, 64, 77, 80, 217, 228, 266, 271
 intellectual 130, 159, 201, 210, 260, 262, 264,
 266, 269, 271, 275, 279, 280*n*2, 285, 304
 ~ ability/ capabilities 158–159
 ~ deficiency 159
 European ~ 5, 279, 281, 301, 304, 306
 intelligence 217, 229, 280*n*1
 intent/ intention 16, 20, 22, 27–29, 35, 37,
 97, 143*n*32, 171, 176, 188, 199
 interpretation 2–3, 5, 10, 13–14, 17–19, 21–23,
 25, 27–32, 34, 37–39, 50, 55, 58, 69,
 76, 80, 85, 88, 93, 95, 97–98, 106, 109,
 125, 126*n*4, 127, 133, 135, 143, 146–148,
 160, 166, 185, 187–189, 194, 197–198,
 201–203, 215, 253, 257, 282, 292*n*28, 294,
 296–297, 301, 305–306
 interpreter 11, 15, 21, 146*n*, 250, 252, 306
 interrogative 29, 71, 73, 82
 intertexts 154
 intertextuality 109, 133
 intimacy 230, 249, 252–253, 298, 302
 intuition 4, 216–217, 231–232
 invasion 170, 175
 ~ of Iraq 120
 investigators 77
 invocation 61, 132, 170, 247
 iron 165
 irony 59, 105, 292, 294
 irrigation 87
 Islam 9, 17, 19, 21, 24–25, 97, 129–132,
 137–138, 140*n*26, 241, 201, 235, 237, 263,
 272, 274, 283, 291, 294, 296, 298, 301, 306
 conversion to ~ 158, 186
 foundational text of ~ 289, 306
 legal-centric ~ 240
 Islamic
 ~ calendar 130
 ~ exegesis 11
 ~ heritage 10, 203
 ~ jurisprudence. *See* jurisprudence:
 Islamic
 ~ law 1, 28, 139*n*23, 144*n*34, 146*n*, 239
 ~ legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) 189
 ~ legislation 1, 115
 ~ religion 262*n*, 306
 ~ scripture 5, 279
 ~ tradition 10–11, 61, 112, 201, 275, 283,
 287, 297
 ʿiṣma. *See* infallibility
 Israelites 14, 84–85, 110, 127, 138*n*21, 161, 167,
 190*n*5, 194
isrāʾīlīyyāt 11, 166, 194–197, 199

jāhiliyya. *See* pre-Islamic: Age of Ignorance
 jewels 157, 267
 Jewish 1, 11, 96, 98, 106, 111, 126*n*4, 129, 130,
 132, 135*n*19, 142*n*29, 153, 154, 190, 200,
 289
 ~ communities 110, 253
 Jews 11, 13–14, 19, 25, 39, 68, 130, 136*n*, 138,
 142*n*, 186, 289

- jihād* 143*n*30
jinn 156, 159–162, 165–166, 171, 177
journey 142*n*, 171, 174, 178, 202, 219, 225, 239, 251, 264, 266
Judaism 129–130, 132*m*11, 138
judge 146*n*, 148, 211–212, 262*n*, 272*n*
judgment 16, 30, 55, 57, 68, 74, 122, 124, 146*n*36, 159, 162, 176, 192, 241, 245*n*13, 274, 288
jurisdiction 21
jurisprudence (*fiqh*) 186*n*, 195, 212, 230, 239
 Islamic ~ 189, 224
jurist 11, 20, 23–25, 54, 65, 189, 191, 193
 Muslim ~ 143*n*30, 189, 192–193, 235, 239
justice (*ʿadālat*) 9, 25, 30, 36–37, 39, 95–96, 123–124, 170, 214–217, 219, 245, 257
 divine ~ 31, 211, 290
 downward ~ 216
 human ~ 211
 poetic ~ 51
 universal ~ 126*n*5
 upward ~ 216
juxtaposition 175, 188

Ka'ba (Ancient House, Holy House, House) 21, 139, 191*n*8, 220, 224, 290
Kalīla wa-Dimna 284
Karahisārī School 271*n*
Khalaf. See scholars: later
Kharijīs 17–19
(the) killed 30
killer 30, 36
killing 12, 22–26, 28–32, 129, 146, 192, 219, 223, 228–229, 297*n*, 298*n*
 wanton ~124
king 3, 59, 108, 110*n*, 126, 157–159, 160, 162–165, 167, 168*n*5, 169–177, 179, 218, 225, 229, 284, 291
kingdom (*malakūt*) 32, 101, 110*n*, 156–158, 160, 163–164, 166–167, 172, 177
kingship 161–162, 165, 167
kinsfolk. See relative
kinship. See relative
kinsman 111
knowledge 15, 32–33, 44, 60–61, 66–68, 78, 80, 88, 99, 153, 159, 161–165, 170–172, 180, 186*n*, 188, 210–211, 216–217, 228–232, 234, 242, 244, 246–247, 257, 260–266, 269–270, 272, 274–275, 280, 285–286, 291, 302
 ~ acquisition 4
 encyclopedic ~ 305
 infinite ~ 248
 intuitive ~ 4, 210
 religious ~ 4–5, 234, 236, 243–246, 253, 276, 289
labor hiring 191
lame 235
land (terrain) 12, 14, 25, 32, 47, 67, 71–73, 75, 79, 81–82, 85, 87, 110, 177, 242, 286, 290
 ~ of Moriah 134*m*17
 promised ~ 84
 strange ~ 110
landmarks 93
landscape 61, 71, 76, 87, 93, 203, 258
language 121, 133, 144*n*33, 147, 155, 185, 192, 196, 200, 213, 225, 231, 234–235, 235*m*1–2, 239, 244, 246, 249, 252–254, 265, 272, 280, 284*n*8, 286*n*5
 ~ of ants 171
 ~ of birds 165, 171
 disability ~ 237–238
 ~ of *jinn* 171
 vernacular ~ 286*n*15
Last Supper 109, 109*n*9
law 14–15, 19, 21–22, 24–25, 28, 30*n*8, 53, 66, 81, 110, 122, 125–127, 142, 144, 146, 148, 189, 190–191, 203, 286, 293, 298
 ~ of God 35, 143
 legitimate ~ 124
 retaliatory ~ 25
 sacred ~ 111, 121
 universal ~ 137
lawgiver 137, 191
lawlessness 2, 33, 124, 148
lawmaking 137
leader 30*n*8, 50*n*, 126, 137, 160, 169, 174–175, 198, 291–292
 religious ~ 234
leadership (*imāma*) 14, 16, 34, 169, 171, 175, 236
legacy 85, 188, 294
legal interpreter (*mujtahid*) 146*n*
legend 44–45, 52, 58, 70, 154, 163, 187

- legislation (Shari'a) 1, 14, 28, 36, 115, 167, 189,
 190–191, 194
 ~ of the past prophets" (*shar' man*
 qablanā) 189
 legitimacy 2, 105, 122, 158, 172, 191, 199, 257,
 261, 271, 274–276
 lessons (*ibra*) 3, 37, 48, 55, 60, 64, 66, 72–73,
 79, 80, 88, 152, 167, 197, 199, 272*n*10
 letter 115, 156–157, 170, 172, 174–176, 261
 Islamic ~ 79
Levh-i Mahfūz. See Preserved Tablet
 liberalism 3, 120–123, 129
 political ~ 123, 127, 134, 145, 147–148
 liberals 123
 life
 democratic ~ 124–125, 145
 eternal, everlasting ~ 108, 229, 298
 ethical ~ 269
 human ~ 25, 37, 93, 96, 99, 107–108, 215
 literary ~ 5, 306
 personal ~ 96, 102, 280
 political ~ 121
 spiritual ~ 297
 virtuous ~ 210
 lightning 78
 lineage 14–15, 243, 269
 literature 10, 38, 188, 195, 200, 202, 212–213,
 217–218, 231, 245*n*13, 260–261, 267, 274,
 286*n*15
 akhlāq ~ 4
 Arabic ~ 36, 59, 201
 Christian ~ 106
 classical ~ 33
 exegetical ~ 11
 Rabbinic ~ 106, 110
 Sufi ~ 4, 213
 traditional ~ 199
 Western ~ 197
 livestock 64, 78, 140, 142*n*
 loaves 220
 locutions 237, 242, 245*n*13, 248
 lore 52, 61, 97, 98, 187, 269
 losers 12, 31, 191
 loss 13, 17, 59, 120, 123, 201, 243
 lots 128, 191
 casting ~ 191
 love 5, 27, 34–35, 38–39, 129, 166, 170,
 223–224, 252, 284*n*8, 298*n*, 300–304
 divine ~ 34, 38–39, 300–301
 ~ for/of God 135, 300–304
 irrepressible ~ 5
 passionate ~ 300–301
 pure ~ 303–304
 ~ for wives 166
 loyalty 175
 lust 5, 228–229
 magic 161, 165, 177, 180
 books of ~ 177
 magician 166, 177
 Mahometans 301
 male 139, 155–156, 172, 176, 178, 238
 malevolence 2, 35, 38–39
 mandatory act 125
 mankind 44, 50, 55–56, 61, 66–67, 70, 80–81,
 87–88, 96, 136–137, 139, 177, 191*n*8, 260
 marginalization 3, 185, 188–189, 195, 202
 marriage 19, 36, 159, 240
 martyr 12, 24, 143, 224
 martyrdom 126, 129, 143–147
masākin. See dwellings
 master 213, 218, 245, 258–259, 261–262, 266,
 269, 271–272, 274, 275, 300
 mastery 164, 259, 261, 274
 materiality 176
 maternalistic 175
 matrimonial rights 15
 Matthew 110, 170
 maximalists 196, 239
 maxims 287
 meal 107–109
 earthly ~. See feast
 meaning
 inner ~ (*bāṭin*) 195
 ostensible ~ (*ẓāhir*) 195
 Meccan 13*n*
 ~ sanctuary 131
 ~ sūras 13*n*, 98, 185, 240, 247
 ~ temple 290
 medieval 143, 301
 ~ Islamic works 66
 ~ Sufi mystics 201
 memoirs 260
 memory 69, 97, 167, 214
 menstruation 239
 merchants 79

mercy 54, 68–69, 83, 95, 101–103, 107–109,
112, 226, 228, 252, 291
message 2, 22, 52–53, 57, 59, 61, 65, 70,
73, 75, 80–81, 85–88, 97, 103, 105, 108,
132, 152, 160–161, 170, 172, 174, 178–179,
195–196, 199, 210, 245–246, 248, 251,
282, 291, 293, 306
messenger. *See* prophet
divine ~ 103, 195
messiah 126
metallurgy 261
metaphor 101, 172, 224, 243–244, 279
metaphorical 39, 163, 235
~ murder 32
meteorology 66, 68
methodology 3, 9, 198, 201, 203, 288
middle
absolute ~ 215, 218
relative ~ 215, 218
Middle Ages 279, 298, 303
migrants 110
migration 120
military 61, 143
~ expedition 165, 290
milk 12, 139n24, 221–223
millat Ibrāhīm (the religion of Abraham)
132, 190
mind 62–64, 80, 102, 153, 171, 285, 300
~ games 172, 174
minimalists 38, 196
minister 158, 249
miracles 57, 124, 159, 269
miraculous 109, 125, 297
~ stories 272
misdeeds 194
misery 12, 291
misfortune 59, 141n27
Mishnah 130
mission 26, 44, 57, 58, 72, 74, 83, 85–86, 129,
132n13, 170, 174, 291, 293
missionary, missionaries 110, 301
Christian ~ 279, 288
mockery 51, 100
Mohammedanism 299
monarch 169–170, 172, 174
righteous ~ 215–216
monolithic figure 201
monotheism 68, 241, 245, 247–248

monotheist (*ḥanīf*) 103, 157, 243n11
monotheistic 129, 170, 247–248
~ faith/ religion 11, 129, 160, 166, 171,
174–176
~ traditions 129, 202
monument 5, 46, 50, 59–60, 72–73, 80,
85–86
See also castles, fortresses, obelisks,
palace, pyramids, tower
moon 52, 66, 78, 80
moral
~ blame (*ḥaraj*) 235
~ conduct 17, 99
~ corruption 81
~ degeneration 294
~ depravity 253
~ duty 2, 82
~ fables 285
~ failings 34
~ guidance 22, 194, 203
~ implications 1, 26, 194, 203
~ lessons 72, 79, 80
~ philosophy 1, 5, 200
~ responsibility 304
~ unity 141–142
~ values 5, 97, 196, 259, 268, 276, 301
~ violations 32
~ virtue 2, 4
morality 36, 86, 200, 216, 234, 260, 269, 275
consequentialist ~ 2, 44, 87
utilitarian ~. *See* utilitarian morality
mortification 297–298
mosque(s) 4, 190n6, 220, 240, 254, 261
imperial ~ 261n2
mother 58, 156, 159, 176, 248, 250–251, 282,
288m9
motifs 36, 59, 61, 78, 128, 161, 241, 267,
294–295, 299
literary ~ 33, 199
polemical ~ 306
ubi sunt ~ 59, 61
mountain 29, 45–47, 50–52, 59, 80, 86, 107,
139, 164, 265, 281
mouse 220
al-Mubtadaʾ. *See* Genesis
muḥaddithūn 23
muḥaqqaq 264
mujtahid. *See* legal interpreter

- mummification 51
 mummy 51, 87
munāfiqūn. See hypocrites
 mundane 143–145, 147
 murder 9–11, 16, 22–24, 26–32, 34–35, 37,
 128, 222
 repellence of ~ 32
 (the) murdered 27
 murderer 9, 27
 Murji'a 17
 muṣḥaf. See Qur'ān
 musk 157
 Muslim 1, 3–5, 9, 11, 13, 18, 25, 30, 32, 39,
 51, 82, 96–97, 101*n*, 120, 131*n*9, 132*n*11,
 132*n*13, 134, 136–139, 141*n*28, 143*n*30,
 144*n*34, 147, 154, 156, 160, 186–187,
 189, 190–197, 213, 234, 237, 240, 247,
 254, 259–261, 272, 275, 279–280, 282,
 286–291, 295–296, 298, 299, 301–302,
 305
 ~ community 4, 14, 196, 201, 235, 240,
 254
 ~ conduct 275
 ~ exegetes. See exegete: Muslim
 ~ jurists 143*n*30, 189, 192–193, 235, 239
 ~ scholars 9*n*, 11, 16, 160, 187, 280, 300
 ~ soldier 143
al-mu'tafikāt (Overturned Cities) 47
mutawassimīn 48, 76, 79
 Mu'tazili(s) 17–18, 26, 28, 66, 189, 193,
 ~ exegete 192
 Mu'tazilism 234
 mute 235, 244, 245–246
 muteness 236, 239–240, 243–247, 253
muttaqīn (God fearing) 17–18, 74, 84, 101
 mysteries 158, 265
 mystics 201, 294, 299–301, 303
 mystical 230–231, 264, 282–283, 294, 299,
 302–305
 ~ contemplation 295
 ~ interpretation 292*n*28, 306
 ~ poetry 297
 ~ theology 302, 305
 mysticism 282–283, 294, 295, 302*n*44, 303,
 305–306
 crisis of ~ 303
 French ~ 304
 monastical ~ 304
mystique 283, 294*n*, 295, 302
- mythology 49
 myths 3, 121, 132*n*13, 154
- Naqshbandī
 ~ master 218
 ~ *shaykh* 231
- narration 1, 11–12, 22, 96–97, 102, 152–153,
 186*n*, 187*n*, 188–189, 194–196, 237, 248,
 261, 263, 271–272, 275, 283, 290
 biblical ~ 16
 extra-Qur'ānic ~. See extra-Qur'ānic:
 narration
- narrative(s)
 annihilation ~ 2
 biblical ~ 13–14, 111, 133, 152, 172, 199
 canonical ~ 195
 ~ coherence 178
 coherent ~ 152, 162
 counter- ~ 186
 ~ discourse 192
 ~ ethics 1–2, 93, 96–98, 200
 ~ of figures 55
 ~ genres 187
 individual ~ 98
 literary ~ 5, 199, 257
 ~ motifs 199
 non-canonical ~ 195
 Ottoman ~ 267
 para- ~ 3, 152–153, 155, 161–162, 167,
 176–179
 poetic ~ 263–264
 ~ of prophets 58
 ~ prosthesis 237
 punishment ~ 76
 public ~ 167–168
 religious ~ 28, 167, 287
 ~ texts 153
 theological ~ 176
 ~ voice 291
 See also *ḥadīth*, hagiography, history, *qīṣaṣ*
 al-anbiyā', *sīra*
- narrativity 96
 narrativization 4–5, 257, 264, 269, 276
 narratology 96, 201
 narrators 176
 ḥadīth ~ 193–194
nasīb (amatory prelude) 61
 Nāṣirean Ethics 213
naskh 264, 271*n*

- nations 16, 32, 47, 52, 57, 59–61, 68–69,
72–75, 81–87, 88, 135, 160, 190, 195–196
 - ancient ~ 44, 52, 57, 60, 72–73
 - punished ~ 2, 44, 74, 87
- natural phenomena 99
- nature 5, 16, 18, 33, 35, 37–38, 44, 71, 80–81,
103, 121–122, 125–128, 146, 152, 161, 175,
190, 195, 262, 266, 270–271, 282, 294,
295, 299, 301
 - angelic ~ 273
- Nazism 123
- (the) needy 107, 111, 140
- negation 29, 109, 297
- negotiation 98
- Nehemiah 167
- neighbors 110
- Neoplatonist 302
- New Testament 3, 106, 110, 127, 132, 145, 197,
288
- nobility 157, 175, 269, 280
- nobles 39, 103, 157, 159, 176
- nomination 168
- non-biblical 299
 - ~ figure 49
 - ~ peoples 56
 - ~ stories 185
- non-prophetic
 - ~ actors 178
 - ~ agents 178–179
 - ~ figures 153
 - ~ stories 185
- norms
 - ~ of existence 122
 - ~ of legality 122
 - social ~ 103
- nostalgia 61
- novels 1, 36, 197, 284
- novelty 169, 285, 305
- nuqta* 263–264
 - See also* calligraphy, Pen
- oasis 47
- obedience 17–18, 34–35, 44, 88, 137, 246
- obedient 157
- obelisks 50
- obituary. *See* eulogy
- obligation 4, 17, 20–21, 23–24, 44, 53–55, 62,
65, 67–68, 70–71, 79–80, 88, 106, 137,
139, 142–143, 147, 247, 254
- observation 2, 44–45, 53, 67–68, 71, 73,
77–78, 87–88, 105, 137
- obstinacy 16, 65, 83–84
- ocean 165, 220
- oddities 86
- odes. *See* poem
- offering 12, 15–16, 34, 36, 128, 138, 147
 - burnt ~ 134*n*17, 135, 139
 - idolatrous ~ 124
- offspring 12, 32, 159, 299
- Old Testament 160
- omnipotence 99
- omnipresence 247–248
- opponents 98–100, 105
 - pagan ~ 111
- (the) oppressed 30–31, 36
- oppression 51
- oppressor 30–31
- orality 234, 246, 253–254
- ordinance 24
- organs 55, 63–64, 73, 80
 - sensory ~ 55, 64–65
 - See also* ears, eyes, hearts, minds
- oriental(s) 280, 284–285, 288, 305
 - ~ erudition 280, 305
 - ~ fables 283
 - ~ languages 280, 284*n*8
 - ~ narrative creativity 282
 - ~ vogue 284
 - ~ wisdom 285–286
- orientalism, orientalist 10, 279, 284, 289*n*22,
304
- ornamentation 95
- orphans 141*n*27, 228
- orthodox 195, 294
- orthodoxy 302*n*42, 303
- oryx 78
- ostracism 16
- Ottoman(s) 4–5, 212, 257–260, 262,
266–267, 270, 275–276
 - ~ authors 4, 257, 260, 281*n*5
 - ~ calligraphy. *See* calligraphy: Ottoman
 - ~ chief architect Mimar Sinân
 - ~ Empire 212, 258–259
 - ~ scholars 212, 267*n*
 - ~ society 258, 260
 - ~ treatises 257, 260*n*, 261
- overtures 257, 260, 262, 269, 272, 275–276
- Overtured Cities. *See* *al-mu'tafikât*

- pacificism 2, 22, 33
 pacifism 23, 39
 pacifist 25, 37
 pagan 45, 60, 69, 84, 111, 128–129, 132, 142*n*
 ~ intellectuals 130
 Meccan ~ 68
 ~ rituals 130
 palace 50, 59, 73, 93, 112, 157–160, 164,
 174–175, 225, 229
 palm trees 47
 pan-semiotic 155
 parable 2, 13, 76, 201, 245, 285
 paradigm 2–3, 34, 38, 44, 87, 97, 144, 167,
 187, 198
 paradise 2, 12, 14, 34, 95–96, 99–101, 105, 108,
 251, 298
 paradox 129, 131
 parallelism 61, 99
 para-narrative 3, 152, 155, 162, 167, 176–178
 ~ agendas 153, 161, 178–179
 parent 34, 159, 228, 240
 parenthood 240
 parody 51
 paronomasia 78
 participation
 religious ~ 4, 239, 251–253
 parties
 fascist ~ 120
 nationalist ~ 120
 passions 5, 120, 164, 297–298
 patience 35, 219, 227
 patrimony 138, 216
 patronage ties 279
 Pauline Christianity 138
 peace 2, 9, 66, 82, 84, 93, 100–102, 113, 134,
 136, 161, 271, 304
 interior ~ 304*n*45
 peacock 229, 298
 pearl 157, 165, 224, 267, 272
 pedagogy 276
 Pen(s) 260, 263–264, 267–268–269,
 271–274
 creation of the ~ 264, 271–272
 ~ of Enlightenment 273
 Reed ~ 267–268
 Six ~ 272*n*
 penalty. *See* punishment
 penman, penmen 269–270
 perception 2, 36, 55, 62, 64–65, 80, 96, 99,
 112, 153, 167, 176, 201, 214
 perfection 210
 human ~ 193
 performance indicators 155
 permissibility 23, 25, 27, 67–68, 191, 193
 persecutions 70
 persecutors 143
 Persianate
 ~ art 266
 ~ literature 267
 person
 first- ~ 53, 99, 249, 253
 second- ~ 46, 53, 71–72, 248–249, 253
 third- ~ 53, 71, 169, 248
 personalization 168
 personas 1
 Petit concile 304
 philology 304
 philosopher 128, 200, 211–213, 217, 301, 303,
 304*n*46
 liberal political ~ 121–122
 Sufi ~ 202, 303
 philosophy 1, 5, 96, 198, 200, 231, 296
 Islamic ~ 202
 physical
 ~ distress 251
 ~ suffering 251
 ~ trait 238, 244
 physicality 77, 79
 physiognomy 78
 piety (fear of God, *taqwā*) 2, 9, 17–21, 35, 75,
 105, 112, 139, 141, 272–273, 301, 303
 lack of ~ 15, 19–22
 pigeon 298*n*
 pilgrimage (*Hajj*, *ḥajj*) 20, 79, 137–140,
 141*n*28
 ~ to Mecca 130
 pilgrims 79, 93, 110, 130–131, 141*n*28, 147
 pillars. *See* columns
 piracy 280
 plains 47, 80
 planets 52, 59, 66, 68, 80
 plants 52, 78, 80, 214
 plea 21, 39, 105
 plot 241–242, 244, 287

- pluralism 123
 - interpretive ~ 238
 - religious ~ 303
- plurality 34, 73
- plutocrat 124
- poem (odes) 59, 98, 107, 274, 293, 301
- poet 59, 212, 241, 260, 272*n*, 301
- poetry 211, 231, 262*n*, 292*n*28, 293, 297
 - Arabic ~ 29, 61
- polemics 99, 131, 154, 238, 240, 244, 279, 282, 288, 305
- political
 - ~ covenant 127
 - ~ order 121
 - ~ succession 83
 - ~ theology 3, 120–124, 126–127, 131, 134, 143–144, 146–148
- politics 1, 3, 5, 120–121, 123–124, 126–127, 129, 144, 146–147, 216
 - democratic ~ 123–124
 - identity ~ 120
 - liberal ~ 120
- polytheism 18, 35
- polytheist. *See* disbeliever
- polytheistic
 - ~ gods 128
 - ~ traditions 129
- (the) poor 110, 139–140, 145*n*, 193
- post-biblical 180, 187, 202
 - ~ commentaries 180
 - ~ texts 106, 200
 - ~ traditions 10
- posterity 46–47, 51, 85, 87
- post-Temple era rabbis 130
- power 3, 5, 36, 44, 51, 59–60, 70, 72, 80, 83, 88, 102, 109, 120, 125, 145–146, 149, 156, 158–159, 161–163, 165, 166, 171–172, 174–177, 179, 234, 243, 246–248, 250, 271, 279, 283, 298*n*, 303
 - abuse of ~ 124
 - destructive ~ 70, 75
 - God's creational ~ 107
- praise 35, 160, 170, 173, 193, 221–226, 267, 273, 275
- prayer 16, 18, 20, 26, 110, 130, 132*m*13, 137, 140, 190, 220, 226, 248
 - ~ of the quiet 304
 - regular ~ 141
 - ~ of the sick 239
- preaching 57, 60, 74
- predecessors 84, 231, 273
 - scriptural ~ 153
- predestination 267, 296
- preface 4, 213, 226, 257, 260, 262, 264, 266*n*, 267, 268, 276, 281*n*5, 284*n*9, 285, 286*n*14, 288*m*8
- preference (*tafdīl*) 105, 164–165, 173, 191*n*9, 239
- pregnancy 12
- pre-Islamic
 - ~ Age of Ignorance (*jāhiliyya*) 140*n*26
 - ~ Arabian culture 78
 - ~ Arabians 128, 142*n*
- prejudice (bias) 282, 299
- Preserved Tablet (*Levh-i Mahfūz*) 263–264, 272
- pretexts 32, 145, 295
- prey 100
- pride 60, 157
- priestly
 - ~ hierarchy of Church 130
 - ~ organization of the Temple 130
- prince 212, 216
- proclaimer 241, 245, 247–248
- proclamation 2, 37, 61, 96, 100, 104–105, 140, 234
- progeny 5, 55, 83, 127, 134, 136, 142, 299
- prohibition 17, 21–22, 54, 191, 193
- promises 75, 96, 100–101, 111, 121, 138–139, 161, 219
- property 20, 24–25, 28, 158
- prophecy 13, 44, 52, 60–61, 68, 70, 72–73, 76, 81, 85, 88, 149, 167, 188, 271
- prophet (messenger) 2–3, 13–14, 18–19, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32–33, 44–52, 55–58, 60–61, 66, 68–69, 72–74, 78, 80–83, 85–88, 98–100, 103–105, 128–129, 135, 146, 153–154, 157, 159, 161–163, 166–167, 176–177, 185–197, 199, 201, 213, 221, 223–224, 226, 240–241, 245–253, 260–261, 263, 265, 268–269, 271, 275, 282, 286–288, 290, 293, 296–297, 300, 305
- antecedent ~ 188
- co- ~ 250
- ~ Companions 13
- Offspring of ~ 32
- ~'s speech difficulty 247, 250, 252–253

prophethood 158, 165, 186, 192, 253, 267
 prophetic
 ~ actions 192
 ~ agent 161–163, 165, 169, 173, 176–179, 154
 ~ authorities 261, 265–266, 270
 ~ figures 153, 176, 179, 198
 ~ law 189, 203
 ~ missions 44, 57–58, 72, 74, 83, 85, 174
 ~ narratives 186, 188, 193, 201, 282
 ~ speech 99
 ~ status 153, 161–162, 167, 171, 176
 ~ stories 10, 185, 187, 194–196, 269
 ~ tales 198, 283
 ~ tradition 112, 275
 prophetology 303
 propitiation 3, 127, 131, 138, 140–141, 144
 prosopography 270–271, 275–276
 prostration 17
 protagonist 155, 169, 171, 198, 287
 protection 100–101, 104–105, 108, 110–111
 protector 109, 268
 provenance 111
 proverbs 285, 287
 providence 85, 99
 provider 107–109, 111
 provision 107–108, 110–111, 132/13
 provocation 9, 37
 proximity 39, 48, 77, 79, 84
 Psalm 57, 84, 101, 108–109, 161
 psychological 124, 199
 ~ interpretation 5
 psychotherapy 1
 (the) punished 2, 44, 74, 77, 87
 punishment (penalty) 11, 14, 26–28, 34, 47, 58, 68–69, 74, 77, 83–84, 93, 99, 104–105, 161–163, 190, 196, 240, 291
 ~ of annihilation 69
 ~ stories/narrative 44, 47, 51, 58–61, 68, 70, 72, 74–76, 78, 80, 82, 85, 87–88, 101
 purification 20, 35, 137, 218
 purity 171, 223, 294
 pyramids 50, 78–79

qibla 224
qīṣāṣ. See stories
qīṣāṣ al-anbiyāʾ. See tales: of the prophets
qiyās 65

Qurʾān (Book, Book of the Arabs, *muṣḥaf*)
passim
 copyists of ~ 269
 Qurʾānic, Qurʾān's
 ~ accounts 3, 45, 109, 144–145, 167, 282, 288, 297
 ~ chapters (*sūras*) 56, 58, 97, 99, 237
 ~ commands 70
 ~ conventions 86
 ~ decalogue 111
 ~ discourse 2, 52, 61–62, 65, 80, 86, 234, 237, 246, 253, 294
 ~ epistemology 61
 ~ inscription 93
 ~ message 108, 132, 246, 282
 ~ narrating 3, 152, 173, 178–179
 ~ narrative 1–5, 10–11, 15, 22, 27, 34, 37–39, 86, 93, 96–98, 106, 112, 115, 133, 152–155, 167–168, 173–174, 176, 179, 185–189, 192–203, 234, 236, 261, 279, 287, 305
 ~ parable 2
 ~ stories 1, 4, 10, 21, 28, 38, 97, 115, 136, 186–188, 194, 197, 201, 231, 237, 240, 242*n*, 252–254, 265, 268, 271, 282–283, 291
 ~ studies 1, 5, 96, 185, 200, 203
 ~ supersessionism 138
 ~ tales 14–15, 39, 203
 ~ themes 133
 ~ text 11, 14, 29, 37, 39, 44, 52, 54–55, 99, 109*n*9, 131, 152, 156, 160–161, 168, 199, 236–237, 253
 ~ verses 4–5, 39, 53, 79, 96, 101, 109, 112, 163, 188, 190, 227, 231, 245, 257, 259–261, 263–270, 272, 274–276, 295–296
quṣṣāṣ. See storytellers

 rabbis 106, 130
 rage 34
 rain 45, 49, 291
 ram 141*n*28
 Ramaḍān 239, 251
 ransom 128, 141*n*27
al-Raqīm (metal tablet) 70
 rational
 ~ fact 243
 ~ good 147

- rationale 21, 24, 39, 188, 192
 rationalism 121
 rationality 2, 32–33, 122, 144, 191, 197
 reaction 22, 34, 102–104, 125, 129, 173,
 244–245
 readership 1, 286*n*5, 287
 (the) reasonable 127, 143, 144*n*33, 147–148
 reasonableness 125, 145, 147–148
 reasoning 4, 58, 62–63, 103, 156, 214, 219, 257
 reciprocity 147
 recitation 112, 235
 recognition 3, 44, 88, 99, 112, 129, 141–142,
 147, 197, 201–202
 recompense 12, 25, 31, 74, 134, 249
 reconciliation 197, 202
 redemption 38, 51, 127, 148
 reflection 5, 39, 53, 62–63, 80, 96, 112, 121,
 128, 132*n*13, 148, 153, 192, 198–199, 203,
 214, 230, 261, 274–275, 287, 299
 reformation 289, 303–304
 refugees 120
 regret 13, 32
 regulations 98, 106, 130
 rejection 19, 36, 52, 60–61, 99, 102, 140, 249,
 291
 relationship 4, 17, 20, 37–38, 63, 99, 105, 122,
 124, 127–129, 131, 139, 145, 170, 173, 186,
 199, 202, 238–239, 243, 253, 269, 273,
 284, 299, 302*n*44
 father-son ~ 127, 199
 relatives (kinsfolk, kinship) 14, 20, 32,
 141*n*27, 168*n*7, 293
 See also brother, child, daughter, family,
 father, father-in-law, forefathers,
 grandfather, mother, parent, sibling,
 sister, son, wife
 relativity 218–222, 224
 relics. *See* ruins
 Pharaonic ~ 50
 religion 14, 17–18, 36, 55, 96, 128, 130–132,
 140–141, 157, 159, 171, 173–175, 190, 222,
 224, 263, 269, 274, 279, 280, 281*n*7,
 285–286, 296, 301–303, 305–306
 Abrahamic ~ 132*n*11, 138
 consummation of ~ 14
 monotheistic ~ 11, 129, 166, 171, 174–175
 Near Eastern ~ 130
 pagan ~ 128
 pre-Islamic ~ 140, 269
 rival ~ 279, 302, 305
 Roman imperial ~ 130*n*
 religionists 293
 religiosity 130
 religious
 ~ exclusivism 303
 ~ leadership 16, 34, 234, 236
 reminder 14, 45–46, 65, 134, 153*n*, 162, 166,
 186, 241, 247–248
 remorse 223
 renaissance 197, 303
 repentance 3, 35, 51, 163, 167, 178–179, 223,
 227
 last-minute ~ 51
 repression 138
 repudiation 136*n*, 141
 reputation 15, 107, 270
 resentment 31, 35
 respect 103, 105, 141*n*28, 159, 227, 271*n*, 274,
 290
 responsibility 2, 30, 131, 201, 259, 275, 304
 individual ~ 30, 38, 132
 resurrection 5, 34, 53, 55, 76, 142, 297, 299,
 303
 retaliation 23, 32, 34, 47
 retribution 24, 49, 163
 reunion 250–251
 revelation 69, 98, 121, 124, 132*n*13, 135, 144,
 146, 148, 188, 190, 199, 223, 241, 246–247,
 248, 267–268, 275, 292*n*52, 297
 divine ~ (*wahy*) 26, 165, 177, 234, 245, 271
 Qur'ānic ~ 112, 115, 176, 268
 self- ~ 271
 revenge 35, 37, 290, 292
 reverence 17, 35, 139, 140–141, 227
 reverent 11, 15, 141*n*27
 revival 1, 198, 283, 297, 298*n*, 303, 305
 reward 17–21, 35, 99, 126*n*4, 135–137, 142*n*,
 299
 rhetoric (*balāgha*) 4, 9, 157, 234
 rhetorical
 ~ elements 200
 ~ question 29, 71, 242–243, 245
 ~ technique 203
 rhyme 53, 63
 rhyming *saj'* 71
 (the) right 12, 24, 28, 105, 112, 215, 217, 231

- righteousness 2, 23, 33, 35, 37, 141ⁿ27,
 165–166, 170, 216, 218, 268
risâles. *See* treatise
 rite 139
 ~ of the *ḥajj* 137
 ~ of the Pilgrimage 137, 139
 ritual (*shaʿīr*) 3, 16, 36, 129–130, 137,
 139–140, 142ⁿ, 143, 145, 147, 154, 191, 251,
 254, 259
 Islamic ~ 130ⁿ
 sacrificial ~ (rituals of sacrifice) 130, 166
 rival 34, 172, 258, 279, 282
 rivalry 2, 9, 33, 37, 39
 rock 22, 46, 47, 86, 87
 role
 central ~ 280ⁿ2
 crucial ~ 195
 didactic ~ 60
 paradigmatic ~ 176, 179
 passing ~ 178
 pivotal ~ 1
 prophetic ~ 168
 subsidiary ~ 187
 rooster 298
 ruined
 ~ dwellings 46
 ~ sites 60, 87
 ruins (ancient civilizations, ancient nations,
 relics) 2, 44–52, 55, 57, 59–61, 67–68,
 70–73, 75–80, 82–88, 186ⁿ
 ~ of an abbey 75
 ~ of ʿĀd 46
 ancient ~ 2, 44, 59–60, 70, 75, 79
 ~ of Ancient Egyptian edifices 50
 exceptional ~ 70
 ~ of Lot's town 48–49, 76
 ~ of Maʿrib Dam 52, 78, 87
 ~ of Midian 50, 79
 ~ of Sheba 52, 87
 ~ of Thamūd 47, 79
 rule of law 122, 125–126, 144
 ruler 28, 60, 79, 84, 87, 108, 218
 rulings 18, 21, 159, 189, 191–192, 216
 Rūm 229–231

 sacraments 304
 sacred
 ~ history 153, 187, 287
 ~ Tablet 264
 ~ text 61, 86–87, 154, 167, 268, 288
 ~ value 104–106
 sacrificant 129, 139, 140, 145ⁿ
 Muslim ~ 141ⁿ28, 144ⁿ34, 147
 sacrifice 3, 9–13, 15, 17–20, 22, 23, 106,
 120–131, 133–148, 165–166, 222, 294,
 297–298, 300
 animal ~ 129–130, 140–141
 blood ~ 3, 139, 140ⁿ26, 141–142, 144, 148
 child ~ 128–129
 ~ of Christ 126–127, 131, 147
 covenantal ~ 125–126
 ~ of daughter 106, 128
 end of ~ 129–130
 ethic of ~ 133
 father's ~ 127–129, 138ⁿ22
 human ~ 129
 Islamic ~ 131
 modest ~ 147
 Muslim ~ 138–139
 near ~ 121, 126, 128, 136, 138
 paternal ~ 127
 Qurʾān's conception of ~ 131
 rituals of ~. *See* ritual: sacrificial
 sacredness of ~ 145
 ~ of the son 128–129, 136
 suppression of ~ 130
 symbolism of ~ 130
 ~ of thanksgiving 139, 145, 148
 virtual ~ 130
 votive ~ 131
 worthy ~ 124
 sacrificial
 ~ animal 130, 139, 140ⁿ26, 141ⁿ28, 144ⁿ34
 ~ object 140
 safety 101
Salaf. *See* scholars: early
 salvation 34, 100, 101, 129, 304
 ~ history 44–45, 49, 55–58, 63, 79, 86, 88
 sanctity 5, 16, 25, 39, 131, 257, 269, 290
sānihas 274, 275
 Saracens 301
 Satan. *See* devil
 satisfaction 140, 186, 220, 285
 scholar(s)
 Azharī ~ 197
 contemporary ~ 1, 199, 203
 early (*salaf*) ~ 19, 30, 187, 193, 198
 ~ of ethics 211, 213

scholar(s) (*cont.*)

- European ~ 288
- Ḥanafī ~ 192
- Islamic ~ 265
- later (*khalaf*) ~ 65, 187, 198
- Muslim ~ 9n, 11, 16, 160, 187, 280, 300
- Shīʿī ~ 192
- Sufi ~ 36, 196, 202
- Western ~ 1, 200

scholarship 152, 187, 195, 197, 235, 237, 250, 254

- Biblical ~ 289
- classical ~ 1, 5
- contemporary ~ 1, 5
- Muslim ~ 1, 5
- non-Muslim ~ 1, 3
- pre-modern ~ 3, 185
- Qurʾānic ~ 57
- scriptural ~ 290n22
- Western ~ 153, 200, 203

sciences 68, 263

- architectural ~ 261
- esoteric ~ 231
- exoteric ~ 231
- Islamic ~ 262, 270

scribe(s) 261, 262n, 267, 274

- Almighty ~ 267, 268
- virtuous ~ 270

scripts 261, 264, 266n, 271n

See also muḥaqqaq, naskh, and thuluth/sūlūs

scriptural

- ~ evidence 192
- ~ texts 162, 169, 172, 173, 180

scripture 11, 13, 28, 61, 63, 68–69, 80, 84, 97,

154, 179, 186, 247, 260, 267–268, 269, 288

- fake, forged ~ 282, 305
- Islamic ~. *See* Islamic: scripture
- Muslim ~ 240, 279, 282, 286n15, 289
- oral ~ 235

sea 26, 50, 51, 80, 87, 225

seclusion 298

secularized

- ~ analog 124–125
- ~ argument 123
- ~ concept 120, 124

security 2, 24, 46, 93, 100, 108, 113

seducer 100

seeing. *See* vision

selection (*iṣṭifāʾ*) 15, 34, 39n

self-abnegation 303, 305

selfhood 202

self-negation 297

self-praise 35

self-purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) 35

self-sacrifice 294, 300

self-surrender 294n33

semiotics 155n2

senses 214, 221, 299

- enjoyment of the ~ 299
- external ~ 214
- internal ~ 214

sentiment 14, 186n, 265, 300, 301n40

separation 145, 219, 223, 250–251

sequence of events 152, 187

sermons 234, 246, 254

servants 15, 26, 84, 93, 99–100, 134, 171, 177, 221

shaʿāʾir. *See* rituals

Shafīʿīs 189

shame 12, 16, 104–105, 170, 225

Sharīʿa. *See* legislation

Muḥammadan ~ 190

shaykh 218–221, 231

al-Shayṭān. *See* devil

sheep 12, 249

shepherd 12, 221–226, 231

Shīʿī(s) 192, 194

~ commentaries 12

ship 45–46, 128

shout 82

shrine 70

sibling 28, 33, 37

(the) sick 110, 235, 239

sickness (*marād*) 239, 251

sight. *See* vision

signs

- celestial ~ 66
- cosmic ~ 80n
- earthly ~ 66

sin(s) 2, 10, 12, 25–33, 35, 37, 81, 127, 142n, 193–195, 226–227, 298

grave ~ (*kabāʾir*) 17

minor ~ 194

sincerity 15, 17–19, 174, 178

sinner 18, 27, 35, 47, 74, 143n31

sīra 187, 293

- sister 12, 15, 19, 288^{m19}
 skepticism 127ⁿ, 194, 198
 slave 122, 141^{m27}, 171, 177, 245, 293
 sleep 22, 70, 220
 sluggishness (*tafrīt*) 214–215, 220,
 See also greed
 slumber 221
 snake 249
 Social Actor 155–156, 169ⁿ, 172–173, 178
 ~ Approach 154, 167
 ~ categories 168
 society 3, 9, 38, 87, 96, 100, 122–124, 200,
 215–216, 234, 237, 244, 246, 253, 258,
 260, 266
 just ~ 123, 145, 215
 political ~ 121, 147
 well-ordered ~ 123, 127, 145, 147
 sociology 198
 solace 186
 solidarity 3, 60, 131, 140–142, 144–145,
 147–148
 son(s) 2, 14, 56, 102–103, 106, 108, 121–122,
 126–129, 133^{m15}, 134–139, 146, 148,
 160–161, 163, 166, 190ⁿ⁷, 199, 210, 289
 ~ of Ādam 9–15, 19–20, 23, 25–29, 32–34,
 38–39
 ~ of God 14
 identity of the ~ 133^{m15}, 134
 ~ of Israel 84
 righteous ~ 13
 wicked ~ 13
 sonship 14
 sophistication 59, 72
 sorcery 124, 161, 165, 177, 179
 soul (*nafs*) 12, 29, 31–32, 35, 38, 174, 210–211,
 213–215, 218, 223–224, 228–230, 262,
 266, 295, 297, 298ⁿ, 301, 303, 304^{m45}
 angelic ~ 214
 animal ~ 213–214
 bestial ~ 214
 human ~ 31–32, 213–214, 229
 savage ~ 214
 vegetative ~ 213–214
 sovereign(s) 121–122, 124–125, 172
 ~ decision 122
 ~ exception 121, 124–125
 ~ will 121–122, 125–126
 See also king, monarch, queen
 sovereignty 99, 121, 127, 129, 136, 142ⁿ, 148,
 162, 165
 democratic ~ 125–126
 political ~ 121
 speech
 ~ difference 236, 250
 ~ difficulties 234, 247, 250, 252–253
 direct ~ 253, 287, 294
 spirit 9, 144, 224–225, 288–289, 302
 spirituality 202, 282–283, 298
 splendor 163, 170, 173
 stability 123, 125
 staff 249
 stars 52, 68, 78, 80, 83, 135, 230
 statue 51, 87
 steadfastness 81, 159
 stigma model 238
 stone 12, 112, 290
 ~ of baked clay 49, 104
 clay ~ 48, 76
 precious ~ 174
 stoning 190ⁿ⁷
 stories (*qiṣaṣ*, tales) *passim*
 Qur'ānic ~. *See* Qur'ānic: stories
 religious ~ 5
 storytellers (*quṣṣās*) 185, 189, 194–195
 storytelling 4, 10, 96–97, 187ⁿ, 196, 202,
 210–212, 217, 282, 284–285, 287, 290
 oriental ~ 305
 strangers 102–106, 110–111
 structure
 social ~ 103, 155
 societal ~ 202, 238
 tripartite ~ 241
 struggle 9, 37, 104, 138, 240–241, 247–248,
 251, 253–254, 289
 personal ~ 248
 subjectivity 202
 submission 25, 141, 175, 268, 295
 success 9, 100, 129, 270, 283–285
 succession 55–56, 83–84
 successor 47, 56, 83–85
 suffering 137, 202, 226, 247, 250–251, 291
 Sufi(s), Sūfis 19, 36, 93, 196, 201–202,
 210–211, 218–221, 228–231, 269,
 294–296, 301–303
 ~ masters 213
 ~ poetry 231

- Sufi(s), Sūfis (*cont.*)
 ~ scholars 36, 196, 202
 ~ storytelling 4, 196, 210–211, 217
 ~ works 213
- Sufism 1, 202
- sultan 211–212, 217, 229, 271*n*
 ~ harem 272
- sun 52, 66, 80, 87, 157, 172, 174–175, 222, 229
 ~ worshipping 157, 168*n*12, 171, 174
- Sunna 81–82, 195, 274–275
- Sunnī 18, 194
- superiority 35, 168*n*12
- superstitions 282
- supervision 162, 165
- supplication 21, 26–27, 249
- sūras*. See Qur'ānic: chapters
 longest ~ 132*n*13
 Meccan ~ 13*n*, 98, 185
 Medinan ~ 185
 shortest ~ 132*n*13
- sūrat
 ~ al-'Alaq 260*n*, 271
 ~ al-An'ām 128, 142*n*
 ~ al-Anbiyā' 240
 ~ al-'Ankabūt 47
 ~ al-A'rāf 56, 299
 ~ al-Baqara 133, 136, 142*n*
 ~ al-Dhāriyāt 102
 ~ al-Furqān 49
 ~ al-Ḥajj 133, 138, 142
 ~ al-Ḥāqqa 45
 ~ al-Ḥijr 2, 46, 48, 76, 93, 95, 97–101,
 104–105, 107, 115
 ~ Hūd 56, 292
 ~ al-Isrā' 111
 ~ al-Kahf 70, 218–219
 ~ al-Mā'idā 13, 39, 142*n*
 ~ Maryam 57
 ~ al-Naḥl 63
 ~ al-Naml 57, 70, 162
 ~ al-Qalam 260*n*, 271
 ~ al-Qamar 45, 56, 63, 68*n*
 ~ al-Rūm 111
 ~ al-Şāffāt 48, 133–134
 ~ al-Sharḥ 251
 ~ al-Shu'arā' 251
 ~ Ṭahā 247, 251
 ~ al-Taḥrim 58
 ~ Yūnus 56
 ~ Yūsuf 76
 ~ al-Zukhruf 251
- surrender 22–25, 170, 294
- suspicion 103, 175
- sustenance 107, 109, 111
- sword 30, 132*n*13, 297
- symbolic
 ~ archetypes 264
 ~ interpretation 32, 197
- symbolism 130, 199, 297
- sympathy 9, 178
- table 108–110
 ~ fellowship 109–110
 ~ from heaven 108
- Tablet 70, 264, 268–269, 273–274
 created ~ 273
 inscribed ~ 271
 Preserved ~. See Preserved Tablet
- Tafsīr* (Qur'ānic commentary) 66, 156, 160,
 186, 197, 199, 292, 297, 298*n*38
- tales. See stories
 French ~ 284*n*8
 Gaulish ~ 284*n*8
 Peruvian ~ 284*n*8
 ~ of the prophets (*qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā*) 201,
 287, 293
 Tartar ~ 283, 284*n*8
- taqwā*. See piety
- tawḥīd* 161–162, 166, 175, 179
- tawḥīdic
 ~ mission 170
 ~ purpose 178
- temple 46, 130, 164–167, 193, 290
 ~ of Lord 163, 165
 Meccan ~ 290
 second ~ 129–130
 ~ of Solomon 70, 164
- temptation 136, 201
- tension 22, 37, 120–122, 172, 202, 241, 247,
 283, 286, 294
- terminology 37, 302
- terrain. See land
- territory 78, 84–85
- test 15, 84, 134*n*17, 137, 171–172, 174
- testimony 153, 299
- thanksgiving 3, 139, 141–142, 144–145, 148
- theater 197
- theistic humanism 131

- themes 11, 36, 128, 130–133, 156, 161–163, 165,
 166–167, 171, 175, 194, 199, 241, 247–249,
 297, 300, 303, 305
 theologian 11, 18–19, 51, 65, 97, 143, 148*n*,
 234, 289*n*22, 302–304
 theological
 ~ concepts 65*n*, 99, 120, 124, 275
 ~ credendum 269
 ~ debates 26, 305
 ~ declaration 249
 ~ doctrines 120
 ~ implications 1, 11, 66, 192, 194, 203
 ~ messages 152, 172, 179, 199
 ~ teachings 132
 ~ texts 112, 271
 ~ threat 286
 théologie mystique 283, 294*n*, 302
 theology 1, 3, 96, 97, 99, 120–121, 131,
 143–144, 148, 200–201, 302–303
 Christian ~ 108*n*
 Islamic/Muslim ~ 65, 237*n*4, 257
 mystical ~ 302, 305
 negative ~ 133
 orthodox Muslim ~ 195
 political ~ 3, 120–124, 126–127, 131, 134,
 143–144, 146–148
 positive ~ 133
 Thomistic ~ 296
 theories
 liberal political ~ 121, 124
 linguistic ~ 3, 155
 literary ~ 1, 200
 sociological ~ 3, 155
 theorists 21, 200, 239
 thirst 79, 109*n*8, 293
 A Thousand and One Nights (*Alf Layla*
 wa-Layla) 281, 283
 threat 28, 34, 68, 75, 175, 286
 throne 70, 157–159, 163, 165–166, 177, 212,
 247
 Allāh's ~ 158, 172
 ~ of Israel 170
 Queen's/ Bilqīs's ~ 156–159, 165, 172,
 174–176
thuluth/ sūlūs 264, 266*n*, 271*n*
 tidings
 glad ~ 105, 134, 140, 161
 good ~ 93, 95, 102–103
 tone 19, 170, 243, 249, 281, 288
 tongue 224–225, 250–251
 defective ~ 251
 tangled, knotted ~ 236, 248–250, 252
 toponyms 56
 Torah 69, 130, 138, 190
 torch 248
 torture 50
 tower (*ṣarḥ*) 50, 286
 ~ of Babel 50
 tradition
 antiquity ~ 102
 Arabophone ~ 201
 Biblical ~. *See* biblical: traditions
 Christian ~ 25*n*, 106, 109, 289, 302, 305
 esoteric ~ 302
 exegetical ~ 131*n*9, 156, 195–196, 290,
 297, 299
 Francophone ~ 201
 interpretive ~ 11, 235
 Islamic ~. *See* Islamic: tradition
 Jewish ~ 110–111, 135*n*19, 154, 190
 Judeo-Christian ~ 108, 167
 legal ~ 11, 236, 237*n*4
 Muslim ~ 132*n*13, 137, 154, 156, 237*nn*4–5,
 282, 305
 mystical ~ 305
 oriental ~ 305
 Ottoman prefatory ~ 260, 266, 267
 Persian prefatory ~ 267
 post-biblical ~ 10, 112
 prefatory ~ 257, 260–262, 266–267
 profane ~ 61
 religious ~ 188, 283
 Syriac ~ 10
 Tafsīr ~ 156, 160
 traditionalist (*muḥaddithīn*) 185–187
 tragedy, tragedies 148, 201
 tranquility 95
 transcription 268
 transferability 286
 transfiguration 126
 transformation 28, 99, 101, 146, 178
 translation 197, 266*n*, 279, 281, 283, 285,
 286–287, 290–291, 293*n*30, 295, 298*n*,
 305
 English ~ 235*n*1, 247
 French ~ 284
 Latin ~ 288, 303
 translator 252, 254, 291

- traveler 63, 110–111, 141*n*27
 traveling 67, 71–72, 110, 286
 treachery 13
 treasure 107, 165, 228, 272*n*, 304*n*45
 treatise (*risāles*) 10, 98, 195, 196, 213,
 260–262, 264–266, 270, 271*n*, 276
 Greek ~ 302
 Ottoman ~ 257, 260*n*, 261
 tree 47, 87, 215*n*, 225
 forbidden ~ 227
 trial(s) 134, 136, 217, 291
 ~ of suffering 137
 tribal order 101
 tribe(s) (clans) 46, 63, 78
 Arabian ~ 291
 barbaric ~ 60
 ~ of Quraysh 60, 128*n*, 129
 Meccan ~ 241
 trick 159, 294
 troops 50, 59
 trope 59, 78, 235
 ~ of hearing/deafness 246
 truth 68, 85, 88, 95, 102–105, 157, 172, 174,
 176, 198, 235, 241–242, 260, 262, 288,
 290, 294, 302–303
 twin 15, 36
 ~ entries on the Qurʾān 281
 sister ~ 19
 typology 58, 99, 185

uḍḥiya or *ḍaḥiyya* (*budn, hady, nusuk*,
 slaughtered as a sacrifice) 131, 141*n*28
 Uḥud 25
 Umma. *See* community
 unanimous agreement 18
 unbelief. *See* disbelief
 unbelievers. *See* disbelievers
 union 159, 294*n*, 300–303, 305
 uniqueness 247, 249
 unity 101, 141–142, 215, 230
 universality 36, 141, 145
 universe 52, 61, 68, 230, 261*n*, 264, 267, 286,
 291
 uselessness 245
 utilitarian morality 2, 44, 87
 utility 259, 285

 validation 197
 validity 20, 161, 189, 192, 299

 valley 46, 78, 82, 141*n*28
 sacred ~ 248
 ~ walls 46–47, 86
 values 1, 5, 97–98, 101, 104–107, 133, 135, 154,
 192–193, 196, 199, 201, 238, 259, 268, 270,
 275–276, 282, 289, 296, 301–302
 vanity 5, 35, 298
 vengeance 2, 33
 verbs 53–55, 62–63, 64*n*, 65, 71, 75–77,
 80, 83–84, 86, 103, 134*n*16, 135*n*18, 141,
 171
 cognate ~ 54
 ~ of hearts (*afʿāl al-qulūb*) 63
 indicative ~ 71
 verse *passim*
 vice 25, 33–35, 37, 81, 96, 210, 215, 220,
 228–230, 286
 victim 29, 36
 victory 108, 174
 violations 32, 57, 105, 131
 violence 9–11, 35–36
 virtue 2, 4–5, 25, 33–34, 97, 101–102, 106,
 109–113, 136, 210–211, 213–217, 219–220,
 229, 260–261, 264, 269–276, 286, 301
 ~ ethics 99, 112, 202
 human ~ 112
 ~ and vice 34, 37, 96
 virtuous 34, 99, 134, 136, 140, 142*n*, 210, 231,
 268–270, 298
 ~ deeds 14, 36, 39
 visions (seeing, sight) 63, 134–135, 142, 299
 ambiguous ~ 135
 ~ of prophets 135
 visitors. *See* guests
 vow 128*n*, 135, 193
 vulnerability 100

waḥy. *See* revelation: divine
 warning 13*n*, 14, 23, 26, 44, 47, 57, 60, 66, 81,
 85, 104, 111, 124, 186, 195, 249
 wastefulness 111
 water 45, 70, 86, 159–160, 175, 191, 215*n*, 220,
 224–225, 292
 heaven ~ 107
 wayfarers 106, 110–112, 270
 weakness 38, 167
 wealth 26, 33, 60, 78, 93, 141*n*27, 158, 163,
 164–165, 170–172, 174, 216
 wickedness 37, 228

- wife, wives 20, 47–48, 58, 103, 164, 166, 225, 300
 ~ of Abraham 102
 ~ of Amram 193
 ~ of Lot 58
 ~ of Noah 58
 ~ of Pharaoh 58, 168ⁿ⁷
- will 25–27, 39, 121–123, 125–127, 290, 304
 free ~ 123, 198, 226, 304
- willingness 13, 106, 121–122, 126, 148
- wind 82, 107, 162, 165, 291
- wisdom (*hikma*) 4, 15, 57, 66–67, 103, 152, 162–165, 170–171, 173, 210–211, 214, 216–217, 219, 228–229, 231, 274, 284–286, 294, 297, 301ⁿ⁴¹, 305
 practical ~ 210, 214
 theoretical ~ 210, 214
- wish 26–29, 37
 ill- ~ 36–37
- woman, women 15, 48, 58, 139, 143, 149, 156, 159, 160, 163, 167–168, 168ⁿ⁶, 169, 171, 173, 175, 179, 191, 199, 222, 226, 238
 independent ~ 171
- wonder 52, 61, 287
- worship 15–21, 33, 57, 70, 87, 99, 235, 240, 279, 289
 sun- ~ 157, 171, 174
- worshipper 166, 168ⁿ¹², 243
- wrath 2, 15, 33, 83
- (the) wrong 100
- wrongdoer 12, 25, 136, 138, 141, 241–242
- wrongdoing 30, 74, 243
- yawm al-nahr* (the day of the slaughter)
 130, 141ⁿ²⁸, 147
- zoology 68, 80

Behind the Story: Ethical Readings of Qur'anic Narratives is a pivotal work that presents groundbreaking research on the Qur'anic narrative as a literary genre with profound moral significance. It underscores the genre's integral role in shaping Islamic moral thought, as manifested in areas like Islamic law, theology, Sufism, politics, and art. The book offers insightful interpretations of various Qur'anic narratives, delving into their ethical dimensions and challenges. It also examines their historical reception and influence across both Muslim and non-Muslim scholarship, covering diverse disciplines such as mysticism, art, and applied ethics. This volume stands as an invaluable resource for scholars and students seeking a deeper understanding of the Qur'anic narrative and its multifarious interpretations in the context of Islamic Studies and beyond.

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ما وراء الحكاية: دراسات أخلاقية في القصة القرآنية، يعالج هذا الكتاب القصص القرآني من حيث هو نوع أدبي ذو مضمون أخلاقي في المقام الأول، الأمر الذي لم يحظَ بالنظر العلمي والمنهجي من قبل؛ على الرغم من تأثيره العميق في حقول الفقه والكلام والتصوف والسياسة والأخلاق والفن، وغيرها. يقدم القسم الأول قراءات تأويلية تسعى للكشف عن المفاهيم والمبادئ والأسئلة الأخلاقية التي يثيرها القصص القرآني، بينما يكشف القسم الثاني عن تاريخ تلقيها وتأثيرها في فنون عديدة تشمل التصوف والأدب والعمارة والأخلاق التطبيقية. هذا الكتاب لبنة جديدة في منهج دراسة القصص القرآني، ويطمح إلى أن يكون مرجعاً لا غنى عنه للباحثين والطلاب المشتغلين في حقول الدراسات القرآنية، والأخلاق النظرية والتطبيقية، والتصوف، والفنون، والدراسات الإسلامية عموماً.

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